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 DOWN

Verses

POEMS 1907
KENSINGTON RHYMES

THE RED TAPEWORM

By
Compton Mackenzie

1941
Chatto and Windus
LONDON

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LONDON**

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TO
H. R. WATSON

My dear Watson,

In his great work *The Parasites of Man* Professor Rudolf Leuckart observes of *Taenia saginata* :

"The Abyssinians consider themselves ill when they are without it, and regard it as having an advantageous influence on their health. Only if it becomes too long do they think it causes any disorder. In Europe, too, it is sometimes asserted that the tapeworm has a medicinal value."

But the distinguished helminthologist of Leipzig goes on to stigmatise this assertion as superstitious and harmful, a condemnation with which nobody who studies his horrifying book will venture to disagree.

Soon after the Munich Agreement there was a proposal that I should visit Germany and give the British public my impressions of the men and institutions of the new Reich. In the course of the negotiations one of the officials at the German Embassy observed to me :

"You must not suppose it is any quicker or easier to obtain a response from a Totalitarian Government than a Democratic one. There is just as much red tape in Germany as there ever was."

You and I may agree that the worm I will call *Taenia rubra* is preying woefully upon the vitality of contemporary life everywhere, but we must admit at the same time that like the Abyssinians most men are enthusiastic victims of the parasite.

Therefore it seems wiser for us to laugh at an incurable ill, and in that spirit I inscribe this book to you with affectionate esteem and gratitude.

Yours ever,

Compton Mackenzie

Isle of Barra,
October 10th, 1940.

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
1. The Rag and Bone Man	1
2. The Ministry	13
3. More Waste	25
4. Lunch at the Heraeum	34
5. A Difficult Afternoon	46
6. But a More Difficult Evening	59
7. And a Most Difficult Night	77
8. Which Continues Most Difficult	91
9. Amateur Detection	106
10. Trouble in Eaton Square	115
11. Holdall Transport	128
12. Sir Claud Huntbath	143
13. Suspicious	159
14. Glenbogle Castle	175
15. More Amateur Detection	194
16. And Still More	206

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
17. High Fettle	221
18. Back to Glenbogle	237
19. The Children's Hour	251
20. The Ministry Again	266
21. Horseshoes	285
22. The Children's Response	295
Epilogue	311

Chapter One

THE RAG AND BONE MAN

AT a quarter to nine on a fine evening in the late autumn of a year when the country was still outwardly at peace the newly-appointed Minister of Waste alighted from his car at Broadcasting House. He was to address the nation at nine-fifteen.

In those days it was not yet a matter of course for a Cabinet Minister to address the nation at the first opportunity after kissing hands. The leaders of the political parties were given the freedom of the microphone on the eve of a General Election, and when, according to the skill with which they managed their dentures and listeners their loud-speakers, they had helped or hindered their Party to win votes, the eloquence of the politician was reserved for Parliament. Therefore the visit of a Cabinet Minister to Broadcasting House was still an event at this date, and the Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P., was accorded on this autumn evening an almost obsequious reception.

At last the Announcer responsible for introducing the voice of the Minister to listeners disengaged the eminent broadcaster from the group of administrative B.B.C. officials and led him to the cosy little studio lined with imitation books whence he was to deliver his message to the nation.

"Perhaps you would like to try over your voice, sir?" the Announcer enquired mellifluously. "I think the control people would appreciate it."

"Certainly, certainly. I'm a novice at this game," the Minister replied, eyeing the microphone as the patient eyes the instruments on the table of the specialist he hopes is not going to suggest that an immediate operation is advisable.

"And you'll be careful to keep your typescript as quiet as possible, sir?" the Announcer went on. "You've no idea how loud the slightest rustle sounds. Are you quite comfortable, sir?"

The Minister of Waste was a plump little man with very short thighs, and in his nervousness over what in those days was an ordeal for the most experienced demagogue he had pulled his chair so close to the reading-desk that the pressure of the table against his midriff looked like squeezing out whatever life there was in his high-pitched voice.

The Announcer courteously relieved the strain by pulling back the chair an inch or two.

"When the red lamp over there lights up . . ." he murmured.

"Do I start right off?" Mr. Apsley Howe whispered.

"I will introduce you first," the Announcer replied. He pressed a button, and leant over to the microphone as tenderly as a shepherd to a shepherdess in a Watteau pastoral.

"The new Minister of Waste, Mr. Apsley Howe, has come to the studio to-night to tell listeners how they can assist him in his campaign to save valuable waste material for the country. Mr. Apsley Howe."

The Minister looked up like a lapdog on trust with a lump of sugar on his nose. The Announcer nodded.

"I have come to tell you to-night," he started eagerly, but before he had been speaking long the habit of addressing political meetings from the platforms of village halls in his constituency of East Wessex was too much for him. He began to look round the studio to catch the eyes of influential local residents, and the Announcer had to beg him not to turn his mouth away from the microphone.

"You'll remember not to do that, won't you, sir?" he begged.

The Minister of Waste apologised with that frank smile

of his, so famous for softening the hearts of the wild men of the Clyde.

"I think I've got the hang of this business now," he assured the Announcer when the 'try-out' finished. "But it's tricky. By Jove, it *is* tricky. I very seldom listen to the wireless myself. Too busy, you know. At a rough guess how many people do you suppose will be listening to me to-night?"

"You're bound to have a very large audience, sir. And the end of the nine o'clock news is about the best time."

"Is it? Is it?" said Mr. Howe, a greedy little flicker lighting up his stone-grey eyes. "But about how many?"

"Oh, I should imagine about four or five million," the Announcer said. "And very likely many more."

The Minister of Waste gulped. Then he pulled himself together.

"What a responsibility rests upon the shoulders of those who are called to serve the State nowadays," he muttered, awed by this fresh light upon a celebrity that still astounded him.

"Would you like to listen to the nine o'clock news, sir, before your talk?" the Announcer asked.

"No, I don't think so. No, I think I'll just sit here quietly until it's time for me to begin."

The Announcer glided from the studio and closed the heavy door behind him. The Minister of Waste was left alone with the clock the minute-hand of which flicked forward in a series of spasms while the second-hand relentless as time itself scuttled right round the dial.

On the table beside the reading-desk whereon the typescript of the talk glowed in the tempered rays of the lamp there was a carafe of water. The Minister's mouth was dry. He poured out a glass, the water bubbling in the studio's silence like a burn in the stillness of a remote moorland. He had raised the glass to his lips when he paused, transfixed by a shocking question. Was his action in pouring out that harmless glass of water audible to an

immense audience? Might the teetotallers of East Wessex—no mean body of voters—fancy that he was fortifying himself with a preliminary whisky and soda? But of course not! How foolish! The wireless was giving out news at this moment. The Minister of Waste took a deep draught and sighed his relief.

He let his eyes wander round the little studio. What a good idea that was for using up books without going to the expense of building shelves for them. Just the backs of them stuck on the wall to deaden resonance, and looking very neat, much neater indeed than real books ever looked. If another war should come there would probably be a shortage of paper. It had been pretty serious in 1918. There had been a moment when it looked as if the war might have to be brought to an end with an inconclusive peace because of a lack of paper on which to write reports and memorandums. If he should still be Minister of Waste in another war he would remember that backs of books idea. It would save wallpaper, and the insides of the books could be pulped. He must have this scheme gone into by the Experimental Department at the Ministry. Nothing like carefully considering the matter at once and bearing it in mind. Statistics about the number of books in the country available could be got out, and forms must be printed with which people could claim exemption for books that had an intrinsic value as rarities. Nobody wanted to destroy genuine old curiosities. He wished now he had said something in his talk to-night about the waste caused by old books. However . . .

At this moment the Announcer came back to ask if the Minister was ready. He thrust a stubby thumb into his mouth to press the plate of his upper denture firmly against the palate, adjusted his spectacles, and took a deep breath.

The red light glowed. The microphone was alive. Gradually as the nervousness left him his voice sounded

less like a guinea-pig's squeak. By the time he reached his peroration it was like an electric bell when the battery is running down.

"The Government is resolutely determined to check waste. No stone beneath which waste may lurk will be left unturned, and no avenue which may lead to waste will be left unexplored. I have the personal assurance of the Prime Minister that my crusade against waste will be supported up to the hilt. Thousands, nay tens of thousands, yes, and if necessary, hundreds of thousands of pounds will be spent on combating waste. Do you remember the rousing slogan which the Prime Minister gave the voters of this country on the eve of the last General Election? Do you remember that clarion cry which rang through every home, Look Before You Leap? Well, the country did look, and the country did not leap, with the result that at this moment the financial stability of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the envy of the rest of the world. To-night, I am going to give you another slogan. Waste not want not. If you will look after the pennies I give you my word that the Ministry over which I have the honour to preside will look after the pounds. As I speak to you to-night I see myself in imagination knocking at every door in the country and asking if you have any rags, bones or old bottles to sell. I want your rags. I want your bones. Yes, I even want your old bottles. Moreover, I want to buy them. So turn out your attics, clear out your yards, sweep out your areas, and remember that there's a dark corner in every cellar. Within a week or two the Ministry of Waste will be issuing a pamphlet to every householder throughout the length and breadth of the land. In this pamphlet will be found many valuable hints about waste, and all the information necessary to enable you to dispose of any waste material you have to the Controller of Waste for your district. We want to help you, and we want you to help us. There is nothing like

mutual co-operation, and there is nothing which gives grander opportunities for the display of mutual co-operation than waste."

Mr. Apsley Howe sat back with the expression of a child who has just recited *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and looks eagerly for the approbation of its teacher; but the Announcer put a finger to his mouth and leant over to the microphone.

"You have just been listening to a talk by the Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P., the Minister of Waste."

The red light went out. The microphone was dead.

"Was that all right?" Mr. Apsley Howe asked with anxious eagerness.

"It came through very well," the Announcer assured him.

"I tried to make it as human as possible," said Mr. Howe wistfully. "I think people like the human touch, don't you?"

"The Prime Minister is a wonderful broadcaster, sir," the Announcer observed.

This was not quite what Mr. Howe wanted to be told, but loyalty to his Chief forbade him to say so.

"I've not yet had an opportunity of hearing him, alas! But I shall make a point of doing so now. Well, I must say I've enjoyed my first experience of broadcasting. Thank you very much for your help."

"It has been a pleasure, sir. I'll show you the way down."

When the Minister of Waste walked up the steps of his house in Eaton Square he felt like a prima donna who has just made her debut at Covent Garden.

"Is her Ladyship in the drawing-room?" he asked the butler.

"Her Ladyship is in the drawing-room, sir."

"Did I . . . did I come through well, Dawkins?"

"Very well indeed, sir. We heard every word you said downstairs."

"It's a wonderful thing wireless, isn't it?"

"Very wonderful, sir. It gives a great deal of entertainment. Excuse me, sir, but I'm afraid her Ladyship wasn't quite able to manage the new set which has been installed in the drawing-room."

"Really? Didn't she hear my talk, then?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Her Ladyship found herself in Germany all the time."

"In Germany?"

"That was her Ladyship's impression, sir; but I'm inclined to think without venturing to contradict her Ladyship that it may have been Luxemburg. Luxemburg has been interfering a lot with Droitwich lately, and her Ladyship not being quite accustomed to wireless may have had difficulty in tuning in."

"But I told you to see the set was working. You should have tuned it in for her Ladyship."

"I beg pardon, sir, I did tune it in when the news began at nine o'clock; but her Ladyship disliked the voice of the Announcer and said she would switch on the set herself when it was time for you to speak, sir."

"And so she never heard my talk at all?" Mr. Howe asked dejectedly.

"I'm afraid not, sir. I was greatly took aback when her Ladyship communicated to me the unfortunate occurrence."

"It's damned annoying, Dawkins."

"Exactly, sir. Most aggravating indeed."

The Minister of Waste went gloomily upstairs.

"And you never heard my broadcast!" he squeaked reproachfully to his wife who was sitting by that pleasant fire, toasting his behind against which he had planned to enjoy with her the discussion of his talk, sentence by sentence.

"Not a word of it," she replied curtly. "Dawkins set the beastly thing for Germany, and by the time he came up there was a lot of idiotic singing going on somewhere."

"Are you sure you didn't turn any of the knobs after Dawkins had set them for my talk?"

"Of course I turned them. I turned every knob I could find. But it was no use. I've told Dawkins to have the miserable contraption taken down to the servants' hall to-morrow morning. They heard you capitally downstairs, I'm told."

Lady Lavinia Howe flung from her lap the two or three illustrated weeklies on which she had been browsing. The gesture accentuated her likeness to a chestnut mare. It was as if she were tossing some not too appetising hay from a manger.

"I must hear what they think about it when I go to the Ministry to-morrow morning," the Minister of Waste squeaked sadly, as he seated himself opposite to his wife. This was not the epilogue he had planned for his talk. He had meant to tap on the drawing-room door and call, 'Any rags or bones or old bottles to-day?' But all the heart for such a jest had been taken from him by Dawkins's warning that Lavinia had not heard his broadcast. Yet it was lucky that Dawkins had warned him. He should have felt rather foolish if he had called, 'Any rags or bones or old bottles to-day?' at the door of the drawing-room and Lavinia had supposed that the microphone had turned his brain.

"I think my talk ought to make an impression on the country," he sighed at last. "I made some good points about waste."

"But does anybody listen to the wireless except in the kitchen?" Lady Lavinia asked in honest surprise. "And you can talk yourself blue in the face to servants about waste, Apsley, but you'll never make any impression on them. They live by waste. I can't think why you weren't offered the Home Office when Dicky Lowndes went to the Admiralty. I hate these newfangled Ministries."

"Well, naturally I should have liked the Home Office," Mr. Howe admitted. "But I *am* in the Cabinet, and Tom

Baxter wasn't when *he* had the Ministry of Waste. And if I make a success of waste I might get the War Office at the next shuffle. I *might* even get the Exchequer."

Mr. Apsley Howe's stone-grey eyes had the melting softness of a mid-Victorian miss dreaming of her wedding day.

"You might," said his wife sceptically.

"After all, my experience as Minister of Waste will be just the experience wanted for the Exchequer," Mr. Howe argued.

"I wish you'd persuade the Prime Minister to give Feltham an Under-Secretaryship," said Lady Lavinia irrelevantly.

"My dear Lavinia, why on earth should the Prime Minister give your young brother an Under-Secretaryship?" her husband expostulated. "I don't believe he's been near the House twice since he succeeded. Besides, there's a growing prejudice against peers in the Government. The public suspect their competency. I don't want to criticise your young brother, but I really don't think I could . . ."

"Oh, very well, very well, don't let's argue about it. I just thought it might encourage him to throw up that foul Blore woman," said Lady Lavinia.

"If we could persuade him to marry . . ." Mr. Howe began.

"She'll see to it he doesn't do that," Lady Lavinia scoffed.

Mr. Howe began to feel pettish. He had come back from Portland Place burning to talk about his broadcast to the nation, and here he was being involved in a discussion about the future of his brother-in-law for whom apart from marrying an heiress and begetting an heir to the Earldom there was no future discernible. An Under-Secretaryship! Lavinia seemed to think she was still in the eighteenth century when privilege could always find a place.

"I do wish you'd heard my broadcast, Lavinia," he sighed. "I hope Huffam heard it."

"That red tapeworm!" Lady Lavinia exclaimed contemptuously.

"My dear, please! He is my Principal Private Secretary at the Ministry."

"That doesn't make him look less like a red tapeworm."

"But suppose people heard you talking about him like that?"

"They would be struck by the aptness of the comparison," Lady Lavinia insisted.

"Even if they were, it would be extremely indiscreet of you to call it to their attention. Do remember our Civil Servants cannot defend themselves. One of my duties as a Minister of the Crown is to shield the officials at my Ministry from public attack. Would it be pleasant for me if poor Huffam heard that the wife of his Chief had compared him to a red tapeworm?"

"Are you giving me a lesson in manners, Apsley?"

"Of course not, Lavinia, but I am asking you to back me up as loyally as I have to back up the servants of the Crown who depend upon my support." Mr. Howe decided to fall back on a sentence from the peroration of his broadcast. "I have the assurance of the Prime Minister that my crusade against waste will be supported up to the hilt. Am I going to fail in supporting my subordinates?"

"Don't be so pompous, Apsley. You're not spouting on a platform," his wife snapped.

Luckily Dawkins came into the room at this moment with the decanters and glasses.

"Is there anything further you require, my lady?"

She shook her head.

"Is there anything further you require, sir?"

"Tell Birchall I want the car at half-past ten."

"Very good, sir."

Dawkins withdrew; and Lady Lavinia poured herself out a generous whisky.

"There's no doubt about it, Apsley," she declared, taking her stance on the hearthrug with a Quorn-cum-Pytchley glitter in her eye, "you are growing pompous."

"I don't think it's pompous to ask you to be a little discreet about my subordinates. I realise that poor Huffam isn't very interesting to you . . ."

"No, by god, he isn't," Lady Lavinia interposed emphatically.

"But he is one of the ablest men at the Ministry. Huntbath thinks the world of him."

"Who's Huntbath?"

"Sir Claud Huntbath, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Waste," explained the Minister almost tearfully.

"Really, my dear, I don't know what's happened to you since I obtained office. You used to be so keen on my career. I shall never forget the way you stood by me when that Labour cur who fought our constituency in '22 suggested I had done well out of the war with my plum-and-apple jam. You were absolutely grand. You simply withered hecklers. I was counting on you to help in this crusade against waste. If you'd only heard my broadcast. . . ."

"It wasn't my fault a filthy noise from Germany butted in," Lady Lavinia protested.

"No, of course not. I'll ask the P.M.G. if it's usual. He looks after wireless. I don't know enough about it myself to explain how it happened. Only, do please be nice to poor Huffam. I'm counting on him a great deal. You must remember that a Minister is at the mercy of his permanent officials."

"All right, all right, Apsley, I'll be good," Lady Lavinia promised agreeably, for which her husband gave her a grateful smile.

He was so much elated by his wife's return to good nature that in his dressing-room he chanted the ragman's cry, 'Any rags or bones or old bottles?'

"Were you singing to yourself just now?" his wife asked when he entered her room.

"Any rags or bones or old bottles," he yodelled coyly.

Lady Lavinia, who was smearing her face with cold cream, gaped and got a lump of it on her tongue.

"There's no madness in your family, is there, Apsley?" she asked when she had disembarrassed her mouth.

"If you'd heard my broadcast, Lavinia, you'd have realised my little joke. I told the listeners to-night that I considered myself the nation's ragman."

"You'd better take a couple of aspirins," she advised and returned to the smearing of her face. Presently she observed that she fancied Tarara for the Cambridgeshire on Wednesday.

Mr. Howe hesitated. Dare he suggest that the wife of the Minister of Waste should be careful about her betting commitments?

"We must have the Huntbaths to dinner soon," he said instead,funking the reproof.

"Who are the Huntbaths?" his wife asked.

"My dear, I told you just now. Sir Claud Huntbath is the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry. He's a very important official. It's he who thinks the world of Huffam."

Lady Lavinia looked round from her dressing-table, a grin upon her face which now had the satiny sheen of the chestnut mare she so much resembled.

"All right, Apsley. I won't tell him what I think Huffam looks like."

"I'm sure you won't," said the Minister of Waste gratefully. "Well, I feel quite tired after my broadcast. It's a more tricky business than you'd think, Lavinia."

"If it's half as tricky as that damned box of tricks Dawkins made such a mess of to-night it must be," said his wife, divesting herself of her dressing-gown and high-stepping it toward her bed.

Chapter Two

THE MINISTRY

THE Ministry of Waste, which was created during the First Great War for Civilisation (1914-18), had not succeeded in establishing its headquarters on the frontage of Whitehall itself. The history of its attempts to do so is one of the most thrilling chapters in the annals of departmental strife, but it is too long to be related here. Even now a couple of Principal Assistant Secretaries, who had reached their maximum salary of £1650 and were wondering which of them would be chosen to succeed to the £2000 a year and a K.B.E. of the Deputy Secretary and the dream of becoming ultimately Permanent Secretary with £3000 a year and a K.C.B., would grow amiable and expansive with one another as they talked over that great day in the summer of 1916 when the Ministry of Waste commandeered the Hotel Superb by a masterly last minute alliance with the Admiralty while the Ministry of Production was relying on an alliance with the War Office to secure that very hotel for itself. After the war the Hotel Superb had contrived the evacuation of the Ministry of Waste, and the Ministry of Production had scored a success by obtaining a frontage on Whitehall. Then the Ministry of Waste had tried to acquire the ducal mansion vacated by the War Cabinet, but in this it was anticipated by the Ministry of Labour. However, finally, when the Ministry of Waste was housed in three separate buildings scattered about Westminster, another ducal mansion was put on the market, and here among the baroque splendours of Wharton House it came to rest, adding fresh wings to itself every other year and paying a heavy rent for the premises in Westminster which remained unlet.

When on the morning after his broadcast Mr. Apsley Howe acknowledged the salute of the Janitor, he found it extremely difficult not to stop and ask Sergeant-Major Pond if he had heard him last night. Could he have been sure that Pond had heard him he would not have resisted the temptation. But to be told that Pond had not heard his talk would involve a mortifying lacuna in the conversation. So he went on to his own room, the painted ceiling of which presented to the eyes of the Minister raising them to Heaven for guidance on behalf of the nation's welfare a bevy of the most buxom nymphs in the buildings. Once or twice at some conference when he, Sir Claud Huntbath, an Assistant Principal Secretary, and perhaps a couple of Regional Controllers of Waste, baffled by the complexities of some problem, had involuntarily gazed ceilingwards for inspiration, the Minister had felt that the rosy amplitudes of the female form were not the most appropriate cynosure for officials trying to devise a way to give the country the benefit of saving the wasted refuse of Covent Garden Market. He had not liked in his capacity as new broom to attempt too clean a sweep at first. It would not do to have the ceilings of Wharton House painted over and then find oneself involved with some damn fellow on the other side of the House trying to curry favour with these artistic cranks who were such a deplorable feature of contemporary London life. Still, there was no gainsaying that these ceilings were particularly inappropriate to so austere a Ministry as his. At the Admiralty these nude forms gambolling in the waves might have presided appropriately over a gathering of Sea Lords. Even at the War Office they would not be quite out of place. But here . . . the Minister's reflections were interrupted by the entrance of his Principal Private Secretary, Oliver Huffam.

It has been mentioned that Mr. Apsley Howe was a little man. He was in fact three inches shorter than his wife, and she was not a particularly tall woman in spite

of her likeness to a chestnut mare. Oliver Huffam was eleven inches taller than his Chief, or to be exact, six feet three inches. Besides being tall he was very thin, with red hair and the dead-white skin that sometimes accompanies such hair. If some men are born Civil Servants, some achieve Civil Service, and some have Civil Service thrust upon them, Oliver Huffam belonged to the first category. No other calling was imaginable for him. His boyhood had been marked by a devotion to rules, a zest for superfluous information, and a most praiseworthy diligence for the prescribed task. He never dreamed of becoming an orchid-hunter in Borneo or a log-roller in Canada or an explorer of the Never Never Land in Australia. He took not the slightest interest in South Sea Islands. To him highwaymen were merely evidence of an inadequate police force: pirates were on a par with income-tax evaders. When romantic elderly gentlemen asked him what he was going to be when he grew up, expecting to hear of arctic ambitions or tropic enthusiasms which they would encourage with a tip, he always damped them by announcing the Civil Service as his object in life.

"The Indian Civil Service?" they would ask hopefully. But Oliver would shake his carrotty head.

"Oh no, the Home Civil Service."

The temperament of the natural Civil Servant is not one that lends itself to adventure, and from the time Oliver Huffam left Oxford to enter the Home Office as an Assistant Principal until the time when by the special request of Sir Claud Huntbath he had, although already in the grade of Assistant Secretary, agreed to accept the post of Principal Private Secretary to the new Minister of Waste (a position that was usually held by an official with the grade of Principal) his life had not been more exciting than an accurately filled-in buff form. True, there had been that moment at the beginning of 1917 when he was an Assistant Principal at the Home Office, drawing a salary of £634, and had been selected for promotion to a

Principal at the newly-formed Ministry of Waste with a salary of £847. It had been a wrench to exchange the Home Office, which apart from the Treasury offered a richer field for obstructive ingenuity than any Government Department, for a new Ministry intimately linked up with the popular cry of the moment to get on with the war. However, Oliver Huffam recognised the value of his obstructive experience in a new Ministry which without officials like him might easily set a ghastly example of precipitate action to a country unable to perceive through the smoke of war that shining maxim 'The more haste the less speed'. Nor did he forget as a relish for his duty that he was more likely at the Ministry of Waste than at the Home Office to reach the grades of Assistant Secretary (£1160 to £1360 with C.B.E.), Principal Assistant Secretary (£1360 to £1650 with C.B.), Deputy Secretary (£2000 with K.B.E.), and Permanent Secretary (£3000 with K.C.B.).

In passing, the grandly economical nomenclature of the Civil Service should be noticed . . . Assistant Principal, Principal, Assistant Secretary, Principal Assistant Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Permanent Secretary. Even the Treasury can only produce a Second Secretary instead of a Deputy Secretary and squeeze in three Under-Secretaries between him and the Principal Assistant Secretaries. Even the Foreign Office and the Home Office can only call their Permanent Secretaries Permanent Under-Secretaries of State and their Deputy Secretaries Assistant Under-Secretaries of State.

Yet there are stylists who complain at regular intervals in letters to *The Times* about the circumlocution and verbiage of officials' English. Let such grumblers try to grade the Civil Service with comparable economy of titular description. Their elegant variation will appear meretricious indeed beside the sober variation at which they scoff.

"Did you by chance hear my broadcast last night?" the

Minister of Waste enquired of his Principal Private Secretary when the latter was taking from an attaché-case his Chief's official correspondence.

"I listened to it, sir."

"Was it . . . did it come through well, Huffam?"

"Very well."

"Was it . . . did you think it conveyed to the public what we are anxious to convey?"

"I think it conveyed your own enthusiasm, sir."

"I'm glad you felt that. I wasn't sure if I had what I believe is called a good microphone manner. It's quite a different technique from platform-speaking. I tried not to give the impression that I was making a speech. I tried to make it homely."

"I appreciated that, sir. But . . . may I speak frankly?"

"Please, please. I always rely on you, Huffam, as I think you have discovered by now."

"Well, sir, I was a little afraid once or twice during the piece at the end you wrote yourself that you were being a little too enthusiastic."

"But can one be too enthusiastic when one is launching a crusade?" the Minister asked, his chirrup touched faintly by dejection as the chirrup of a canary will sometimes hint at the imminence of the moult.

"Oh, I am not condemning enthusiasm as enthusiasm," said Huffam.

"I see," said the Minister, wondering what on earth his Principal Private Secretary was aiming at.

"Everybody in the Ministry is enthusiastic about the object in view," Huffam amplified. "But we have learnt to distrust misdirected enthusiasm."

"Misguided enthusiasm!"

"Excuse me, sir, I said 'misdirected'. I am not sure you may not have led the public to suppose that the Ministry itself is to be the receptacle of their waste material."

"But I made a particular point about that pamphlet we

are distributing giving householders all the information necessary to enable them to dispose of any waste material they have, to their District Controllers of Waste."

"I know you did, sir, but people listen very carelessly to the wireless, and the Janitor informs me that several people who heard you last night have called at the Ministry already this morning, anxious to hand over articles. One man was waiting on the steps with a sack of bones before eight o'clock and made quite an unpleasant scene when Pond told him to clear out."

The Minister was secretly much gratified to hear of this result of his broadcast, counting it the first spontaneous tribute his eloquence had received. However, he tried to look suitably shocked.

"Well, of course, it would become a nuisance if all my listeners last night unloaded their waste material here. But it's not likely to become a habit."

At this moment the Assistant Private Secretary Charles Upwey came into the room to ask if the Minister would speak to Lady Lavinia on the telephone.

"Certainly, Upwey. Put her through at once."

The Minister picked up the receiver on his desk. "This is Apsley speaking, Lavinia . . . what? . . . but tell the woman I did not ask for waste to be sent to me personally . . . yes, of course you've told her already, dear. I understand that . . . well, if she won't go away tell Dawkins to fetch a constable . . . what? . . . I don't quite understand what she has brought . . . it's perfectly all right, this is my private line . . . china! . . . what kind of china? . . . but in any case I didn't ask for china . . . six! . . . did you say six? . . . of course, as you say, what use are they indeed without handles? . . . oh, it's clearly a case for the constable . . . why did Dawkins let her in? . . . I know he heard my broadcast . . . but surely he can understand that my private residence cannot be a receptacle for rubbish, I mean waste material . . . the woman has painted on them the slogan I gave the country? . . . oh, you mean 'waste

not want not'? . . . Your country needs you? . . . but that was one of the recruiting posters during the war . . . the poor soul must be mad . . . I never heard anything so ridiculous. She must have been sitting up all night . . . I'm sorry, Lavinia, but it isn't my fault if female lunatics misunderstand my broadcast . . . but I never mentioned the word 'china' . . . no, I only mentioned bottles, rags and bones . . . tell Dawkins to make that clear. She'll probably go away on her own account if he makes that clear . . . well, if she doesn't he must fetch the constable. . . . I don't want the woman charged, of course . . . she may be one of my constituents . . . just ask her to remove the—er—china and express my appreciation of her response to my appeal, and my regret that the particular waste material she is so generously offering is not required at present . . . no, Lavinia, I can't do that very well . . . I don't think the B.B.C. would agree to such an announcement . . . they would be afraid of offending listeners. . . . I might get them to make an announcement to say that the waste material should be used . . . for . . . for . . .” Mr. Howe faltered.

The Principal Private Secretary came to the rescue of his Chief.

“Until,” he prompted, “householders have received the special forms issued notifying District Controllers that agglomerations of waste material have been accumulated pending further instructions to be received as to the disposal of such agglomerations in conformity with the instructions as to same issued by the Ministry of Waste to Regional, Zonal and Area Controllers for the purpose of transmission to District Controllers and communicated by them to the general public through the medium of advertisements inserted by the Ministry in both the national and local newspapers, . . . no, Lavinia, no, it was Mr. Huffam who was reminding me of the methods we are adopting to get all the waste material on to a proper basis of . . . of . . .”

"Classified collection and allocation," Huffam prompted again.

"Anyway, Lavinia, tell the woman that china at present is definitely outside the schedule. . . . Lavinia . . . are you there, Lavinia?"

The Minister hung up the receiver.

"I must have made myself quite clear. My wife has rung off."

"What exactly was the trouble, sir?"

"Oh, just a ridiculous misunderstanding. Some patriotic woman was anxious to donate six . . . several articles of china to the country. She didn't want to be paid for them. But obviously Lady Lavinia mustn't be bothered with that particular kind of patriotism. It's rather touching really. This good woman was apparently quite carried away by my broadcast last night. My butler ought to be able to deal with her without the aid of the police. Well, now, let me look at any letters you think I ought to see."

Mr. Apsley Howe put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and applied himself to the task his Principal Private Secretary had set him.

"Nothing of great interest this morning, Huffam," he observed at last.

"No, sir. Nothing of outstanding interest. Do you approve my replies?"

"Yes, I think they say just what wants saying. By the way, that suggestion about collecting old tyres is not bad, eh?"

"If I may say so, sir, it would bring us into direct collision with the Ministry of Production. They consider rubber is their province."

"But waste rubber surely must be ours?"

"Rubber is a vegetable material, sir, and the Ministry of Production assumed responsibility for all manufactured vegetable products."

"I don't accept that, Huffam. I consider we should

take a strong line with the Production people. They gave us a lot of trouble over the refuse in Covent Garden Market by blocking our scheme to do something with it. I can't quite remember what it was we wanted to do, but I know it was a very carefully-thought-out scheme which we were bearing in mind. And now you think they'll claim that rubber tyres come under their control?"

"I think they'll fight hard for the tyres, sir."

"Well, I'll fight back," the Minister declared stoutly. "Isn't paper a vegetable product?"

"Certainly."

"And are the Production people going to argue that wastepaper comes under their control? No, Huffam, that's asking us to accept a little too much. And don't forget that Sir John Bunting is not in the Cabinet. I *am*. Sir Thomas Baxter, my predecessor in this Ministry, was *not* in the Cabinet, and he allowed Jack Bunting to get away with a lot of things I don't intend to let him get away with. If we decide after due consideration of the circumstances that tyres are under our control, tyres will be under our control. I don't intend to let my nation-wide crusade against waste be bitched—I mean impaired by the obstructiveness of the Ministry of Production."

"All the same, sir, if I may make the suggestion, we should go a little slow," Huffam argued. "Wouldn't it be advisable to leave rubber out of it until we have had time to judge the public response to our first pamphlet? After all, we shall be issuing further pamphlets."

"Any amount," exclaimed the Minister recklessly. "By Jove, Huffam!"

"What, sir?"

"I'd forgotten hot-water bottles. I spoke about old bottles in my broadcast. Well, shouldn't rubber hot-water bottles be included in that category? There must be a terrific wastage in rubber hot-water bottles. They're always bursting. I remember once, when I was Chair-

man of the L.C.C. Fire Brigade Committee, dreaming I was at a huge fire somewhere and waking up to find that the hot-water bottle had burst all over me. What happens to old hot-water bottles? There must be a fearful waste going on all the time. Has that first pamphlet been printed yet?"

"We've printed twenty million copies, sir."

"We'll cancel it, Huffam. I'll speak to Sir Claud at once. We'll cancel it and print another inserting instructions about the disposal of old motor-tyres, bicycle-tyres, perambulator-tyres, rubber hot-water bottles, yes, and tubes! My god, there must be miles of old rubber tubing going to waste."

"It will involve rather heavy expenditure, sir, to cancel the twenty million copies of our first pamphlet."

"Yes, but think of the amount of wastepaper it will bring in. It will offer us a wonderful opportunity to show what can be done with wastepaper on a really large scale. A really magnificent opportunity."

Even Huffam's prudence could not hold out against his Chief's enthusiasm. He actually committed himself to a programme of energetic action.

"If you like, sir, you could give instructions to the Statistical Department to prepare comparative figures showing the amount of expenditure on pamphlet MW 4560/45 HX/731 and the net return for the pulped paper of twenty million copies. Then a decision could be reached as to whether to issue pamphlet MW 4560/45 HX/731 as it stands with a supplementary leaflet of instructions for the disposal of waste rubber or whether to cancel the first pamphlet and issue another incorporating the details of the rubber wastage proposals. It might be advisable to refer it to the Services and Establishments Department and the General Department and, of course, to the Finance Department. One would welcome the opinion of the Accountant-General."

The Minister had not had time to reply to Huffam's suggestion when Charles Upwey, the Assistant Private Secretary, came into the room.

"Could you spare Huffam for a moment, sir?" he asked earnestly.

"Certainly, Upwey. I'll go over this rubber business in my mind while you're out of the room," he told his Principal Private Secretary.

When a minute later his secretaries came back together he greeted them by a shout of "Tennis-balls!"

"Tennis-balls, sir?" Oliver Huffam repeated.

"What happens to old tennis-balls that don't get lost in shrubberies? There must be a tremendous wastage there. They're made of rubber, aren't they? And of course, there's the flannel or whatever it is they're wrapped in. What else is made of rubber in which the Ministry of Production might be interested, Upwey?"

The Assistant Private Secretary, unaware of the subject under discussion, looked startled by this question, but the Principal Private Secretary intervened to the relief of his junior colleague.

"A person has just arrived from your house, sir, to say that Lady Lavinia sent her here with two parcels."

The Minister frowned. He had been married for twenty years and knew by now of what his wife was capable.

"What's in the parcels?" he asked suspiciously.

Huffam glanced at Upwey. Upwey glanced back in embarrassment at Huffam.

"In view of the fact that the—er—person with the parcels insisted she had been sent to the Ministry by Lady Lavinia herself, Sergeant-Major Pond did not like to turn her away without referring to you, sir, but it would appear that the parcels contain china."

"Good god!" Mr. Apsley Howe exclaimed.

"And the person herself is rather odd, by Pond's account. He would have thought she was a lunatic if she

had not brought Lady Lavinia's card," Charles Upwey added.

"I think you'd better go down and deal with her, Huffam," said the Minister. "Probably Lady Lavinia has discovered she is one of my constituents and therefore did not like to be too discouraging about her . . . her little offering. You could tell this good woman how much I have appreciated the patriotic gesture which led her to donate this collection of waste material, but point out to her that we are not asking for free gifts of waste material. You could explain to her that the pamphlet will tell her how to apply for the right form on which to state the amount and character of the waste she desires to dispose of, and that District Controllers will act in conjunction with the Municipal and Council dustmen to indicate how much waste should be disposed of. In a word, my dear fellow, get rid of the poor soul as quickly and as tactfully as you can. If you find it gratifies her, just take delivery of the—of her little gift and tell Pond to dispose of it as he thinks fit."

"Very good, sir," said Huffam; and his long form coiled round the door to vanish from his Chief's sanctum.

"Huffam will deal with the matter," Mr. Apsley Howe proclaimed confidently.

"I'm sure he will, sir," the Assistant Private Secretary agreed. Upwey knew how highly the Minister esteemed the services of his senior colleague, and that the more he seemed to share that esteem the more likely he was to succeed to Oliver Huffam's place should Oliver Huffam be promoted to rule over a Department of the Ministry, a likely event in the not far distant future, thanks to the favour he enjoyed with Sir Claud Huntbath.

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Chapter Three

MORE WASTE

As Oliver Huffam made his way downstairs he felt, as nearly as any Civil Servant can share the common emotions of the miserable human beings whose lives he shepherds from birth to death, a touch of compassion for his Chief. It must be an endless anxiety and mortification to be married to a woman like Lady Lavinia, a woman capable of so arrogant an abuse of the privileges of good-breeding as deliberately to send that person with her two obscene parcels to the Ministry itself. He thought of his own wife Gertrude. She would not have stood any nonsense from this person.

"I've showed this female into waiting-room One, Mr. Huffam," the Janitor hurried from his glass-covered box to inform the Principal Private Secretary.

"I'll interview her there."

"Yes, sir, you'll have it to yourself. Any callers with appointments for any of the Departments I'll keep waiting in waiting-room Two or in the lobby. She's opened her parcels now."

"Opened them?"

"Yes, and got the contents built up in front of her like a monument. There was a deputation of Mayors from the Midlands for the Chief Controller by appointment, and Sergeant Perkins nearly showed them into the waiting-room on top of her. He's too impetuous, Perkins is, for the Ministry. Always acts without thinking. That may have won him his V.C., but it's against him as an Assistant Janitor. Never mind, I just stopped these Mayors in time. I expect the Chief Controller had a bit of a shock when the deputation was shown right in on him the moment they arrived. He always likes to

keep a deputation waiting five minutes at least. Quite right, too. Some of these deputations want taking down a peg."

"Did you hear the Minister's broadcast last night, Sergeant-Major?"

"Yes, sir, I heard it."

"The Minister didn't say anything about china, did he?"

"Not as I remember. But I was reading the evening paper and may have missed a word here and there."

"I certainly never heard him mention china," Huffam said.

"Oh no, it's not the Minister's fault. It's just a common or garden lunatic as you might say, and I expect her Ladyship got a bit nervous. Well, you can't exactly blame her. You never properly know where you are with a lunatic. Anyway, I'll leave it to you now, sir. I'm glad you came down. Oh, here's Lady Lavinia's card. You'll see she introduces this Miss Quekett directly, as you might say, to the Minister himself. Of course her Ladyship wouldn't have known what was in the parcels."

"Quite, quite," Huffam murmured. "Well, I'll see what can be done."

He passed into the waiting-room where a birdlike little woman in rusty black darted forward to greet him.

"I hardly dared expect such an honour," she gushed. "No, indeed. Oh, how much I admired your broadcast last night, Mr. Howe. It was so inspiring. Yes, indeed, truly inspiring. And there's my little offering." She pointed to the china column on the table. "I *had* intended to fill them with fibre and pot up some bulbs for the dark days of winter, but after your words last night I felt I must *do* something. So I painted a little motto on each one. Rather smeary some of them, I'm afraid. But you'll be able to read them. *Your Country Needs You, Rule Britannia, For King and Country, England Expects, United We Stand*, and your own slogan *Waste Not Want Not*."

And Lady Lavinia was so very kind. She explained that it would be more convenient if all gifts were delivered to the Ministry. So I popped into a taxi with my humble little offering, and here I am. Oh, Mr. Howe . . .”

“But excuse me,” Huffam at last managed to interject, “I am not the Minister. I am his Principal Private Secretary. Huffam is my name.”

“But the Minister will see me for a moment, Mr. Huffam?” Miss Quekett asked anxiously.

“I’m afraid the Minister is in conference at the moment,” Huffam said with grave discouragement.

“Oh, tra-la, tra-la, what a pity!” Miss Quekett trilled. “But no matter, I can wait.”

Huffam was on the point of replying sharply that the Minister was likely to remain in conference for the rest of the day when he observed two teaspoons stuck in the bun of Miss Quekett’s back hair. He decided it might be more agreeable to humour her.

“The fact of the matter is, Miss Quekett, that we want the public to hold their waste material until they have been notified by the Ministry in a pamphlet which we shall be issuing very shortly what steps they should take to notify the Ministry on appropriate forms of any waste material they may have accumulated, with a view to obtaining from the Ministry advice how to dispose of it in the best interests of national economy. Thus, for instance, your . . . your old china . . .”

“Not so very old,” Miss Quekett interrupted coyly. “In fact, comparatively new.”

“Quite, quite,” Huffam assented. “But under the Ministry’s scheme, which has been very carefully thought out, the taking over of china old or new has not yet been envisaged. However, the question of china will certainly be borne in mind, and should it be brought within the scope of the Ministry’s drive against waste you will receive due notice, together with the necessary forms in which you will be able to state what material you have

available. After that the District Controller of Waste will arrange for its collection, duly notifying you in advance when his collectors will call to collect it."

"In other words," said Miss Quekett tremulously, "the Minister doesn't want my china, Mr. Huffam."

"Pardon me, madam, but that is making an assumption which my words do not justify," Huffam insisted. "The question of china will be most carefully considered and borne in mind. At the moment, however, china has not been placed on the schedule of suitable waste material, and therefore although the Minister has been deeply touched by your generous response to his broadcast last night I'm afraid that he is unable to accept your donation. . . ."

At that moment the Principal Private Secretary perceived what, breaking out of official English under stress of emotion, he described afterwards as a wild gleam in Miss Quekett's eye, and sprang aside just in time to avoid *Your Country Needs You* as snatched from the top of the column it hurtled past him and crashed against the door of the waiting-room.

"Madam, madam," he protested.

"I'm no 'madam'," Miss Quekett screamed, and as she screamed Huffam ducked to allow *Rule Britannia* to sail over his head and break with an even more complete crash against the door.

Huffam was debating whether to make a dash for the door or the bell when the door opened to admit Sergeant-Major Pond. The Janitor had scarcely time to ask if Mr. Huffam was wanting something when *For King and Country* struck him full on the ribbons that commemorated the part he had played at Omdurman, Ladysmith, and the Modder River, and a moment later *England Expects* whizzed past his head to break into fragments in the tiled lobby. Sergeant Perkins, V.C., the Assistant Janitor, hurried to the rescue, and having been missed by *United We Stand* managed with all the gentleness of a brave man

to disarm Miss Quekett of her last round of ammunition which was inscribed *Waste Not Want Not*.

"Will I fetch a constable and charge her?" Sergeant Perkins asked, holding in one hand *Waste Not Want Not* and with the other arm restraining Miss Quekett from her evident intention to spring at the Principal Private Secretary.

"No, no, don't charge her," said Huffam quickly. "We don't want to create prejudice against the economy crusade. The Minister would not wish that. I'm sure Miss Quekett will take a taxi quietly. You can pay the driver, Sergeant, and put in a claim to the Finance Department for a refund under the heading of travelling expenses. I will countersign your claim."

"But where will I tell the driver to take her, sir?"

"Where do you live, Miss Quekett?"

"Never mind where I live, you long ignoramus," the birdlike little woman hissed.

Huffam took the Assistant Janitor aside.

"Tell the taxi-driver to put her down outside Westminster Abbey . . . or no, wait, that's rather too near. Tell him to put her down by the entrance to the British Museum. If she makes a fuss there the attendants will deal with her."

"And what shall I do with this, Mr. Huffam?"

Sergeant Perkins, V.C., held up *Waste Not Want Not*.

"Put it in the taxi."

To Huffam's immense relief Miss Quekett went tranquilly away with the Assistant Janitor. The brawny arm he had kept tightly round her had apparently had a soothing effect.

"Are you all right, Sergeant-Major?" he turned to ask the Janitor, who had been standing with a dazed expression on his rugged old veteran's face since he was struck on the ribbons by *For King and Country*.

"Yes, I think, I'm quite all right, Mr. Huffam. No bones broken that is. I'll have this mess cleaned up at

once. But I hope, sir, you'll ask Mr. Howe to be a bit more careful in future when he talks on the wireless. He shouldn't go calling himself a rag and bone man. A lot of people take that kind of thing in earnest on the wireless."

When Huffam got back to his Chief's room he explained that Miss Quekett had been disappointed at not obtaining a personal interview, but he withheld from him the method by which she had expressed that disappointment.

"She wasn't one of my constituents?" Mr. Howe enquired anxiously.

"No, sir. Such investigations as I was able to make indicated the contrary."

"Well, well, it was rather a pity she ever came here. Did you take delivery of her donation?"

"That has been dealt with, sir."

"By the way, Huffam, I thought of another point we might make if the Ministry of Production try to obstruct our scheme to deal with waste rubber."

The Principal Private Secretary waited for the revelation.

"Babies' bottles," Mr. Howe announced, with a complacent smile. "I hardly fancy the Production people will venture to claim that the rubber tubes and teats of old babies' bottles come under their control when the bottle itself is so very definitely ours."

"Certainly it would complicate the work of the local collectors if they had to segregate the glass containers from the rubber conductors," Huffam agreed.

"It would lead to overlapping, Huffam. And if there's one thing I am determined the Ministry shall not do while I am Minister it is overlapping. I think I'll take the bull by the horns and get in touch with Sir John Bunting. You might tell Upwey to ring through and ask him if he will lunch with me at the Carlton to-day—no, on second thoughts make it the Heraeum. Quarter-past one."

Upwey soon returned with the news that the Minister of Production would be delighted to lunch with the Minister of Waste that day.

"Will you put me through now to Sir Claud Hunt-bath."

Mr. Howe was presently in colloquy with the Permanent Secretary.

"Good-morning, Sir Claud. Did you hear my . . . I mean can you lunch with me to-day at the Heraeum? Sir John Bunting is coming and I thought we might clear up one or two outstanding points. I didn't warn him you were coming. He'd probably have brought Pringle with him."

Sir Bertram Pringle was the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Production.

"Sir Claud will come," Mr. Howe informed his two private secretaries. "I think between us we ought to knock sparks out of Jackie Bunting."

"I hope you'll take up that question of the Covent Garden Market refuse again," Oliver Huffam urged.

"I will, I will. Was it waste lemons or waste melons we particularly wanted for something or other?" the Minister asked.

"We want all the fruits really, sir, if this scheme of ours for demonstrating what can be done with very little in the jam way is to go through. We must demonstrate with refuse."

"Oh, I think Sir John Bunting will be willing to waive any claim his Ministry may believe it has to this waste fruit."

"Excuse me, sir," said Huffam. "But I think it would be wise to make a clear-cut distinction between waste fruit and vegetables and fruit and vegetable refuse. It would, I think, be highly ill-advised for you whose name is connected with the greatest firm of jam-makers in the country to suggest that the refuse of such places as Covent Garden Market could be used for anything except demonstrations."

Don't you think it might be policy for us to surrender to the Ministry of Production all control over waste fruit as such? Refuse is another matter. You don't use refuse in the making of jam."

"No, of course not," said Mr. Apsley Howe, with perhaps a slight lack of conviction in the tone of his voice. "But I see your point, Huffam," he went on. "I see your point. And I'm grateful to you for making it. That's the kind of trap an innocent statesman falls into. Without that warning from you I should undoubtedly have made strong representations to Sir John Bunting at lunch that the Ministry of Production should surrender all their interest in waste fruit to us. Then before I knew where I was one of these Sunday papers, full of suggestive pictures and criticism of the Government, would be starting a scurrilous campaign about my interest in waste fruit as a jam-maker."

"Which would indeed be most unfortunate, sir."

"Oh, most unfortunate. I despise the sensational Press, Huffam. Of course as a statesman I have to keep in with it as far as my conscience will allow me. But in my heart I despise it. Do you know there was actually a photograph of me in the *Daily Looking Glass* last week with a half-naked girl doing leap-frog over my head, and underneath it was printed 'No wonder Mr. Apsley Howe is smiling.' It's so undignified. How would you like to see a half-naked girl jumping over your head in a damned newspaper?"

"I wish you'd told me to write a letter of protest to the Editor."

"I did think of it. But you know what it is, Huffam. People say you haven't got a sense of humour, and we make such a strong point of humour in this country. That's why I put that bit into my broadcast about being the nation's ragman."

Huffam seized this opportunity.

"All the same, sir, I think you'll have to be careful

when speaking over the wireless to make it quite clear to listeners that you *are* making a joke. On a public platform you would have been able to smile when you said you were a ragman, and the audience would have known at once you didn't want your words to be taken literally. But in their own rooms, where they can't see you smile, and where they haven't a large audience laughing at jokes all round them, people are apt to get a wrong perspective, and we really shall have to be careful not to get too many Miss Queketts at the Ministry."

"Yes, I see your point. I'll bear it in mind. By the way, has the Experimental Department sent in any observations on the possible use of waste linoleum for the cheaper kinds of margarine?"

"Not yet, sir, but I understand that at one time old perambulator-hoods were regularly used for margarine, and the possibilities of linoleum are considered very favourably."

"Well, when you come to think of it, oilcloth must be made out of oil, and so I suppose it could be turned back into oil. I saw a machine the other day which turned butter back into cream. Most ingenious. Yes, you might send round a reminder to the Experimental Department. There must be acres and acres of linoleum and oilcloth going to waste!"

Chapter Four

LUNCH AT THE HERAEUM

WHAT between the continuous attacks upon his preserves by the Ministry of Waste, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health and his own exclusion at present from the Cabinet, the Minister of Production might have been excused for looking somewhat harassed by the cares of state. In point of fact no member of the Government conveyed by his appearance such an impression of well-being. He was a Bacchus in pin-striped trousers, a Silenus in tails, a Priapus in a wing-collar. There would not have been a community in the ancient Hellenic world which would not have rejoiced to accept him as a patron of fertility.

When at a quarter past one he bellowed an enquiry for his host into the aperture from which the desiccated porter of the Heraeum eyed a guest with inhospitable suspicion, the papers on the desk twitched in the unwonted gustiness of the atmosphere.

"Page," said the Heraeum's porter to one of the cluster of buttoned minions that awaited his commands. "Take Mr. Apsley Howe's guest to Mr. Apsley Howe." The Heraeum's porter had long ceased to take the slightest interest in Production. To him this florid emblem of fecundity was merely a member's guest.

The page conducted Sir John Bunting to the cloak-room, which was almost as full of bishops that morning as Nicaea in the heyday of its Council.

"Some people cause a great deal of unnecessary splashing," one bishop observed acidly to another as Sir John Bunting followed the page to where, supported by Sir Claud Huntbath, Mr. Apsley Howe was awaiting his arrival.

Any less confident Minister of the Crown invited out to lunch with another Minister of the Crown and finding that Minister supported by the Permanent Secretary of his own Ministry would have felt he was walking into a trap. Not so Sir John Bunting. He felt himself a match for the most astute permanent official his host could produce. Did Apsley think he would shy because he lacked the support of Pringle? Apsley was mistaken.

"Hullo, Jackie, good-morning," the Minister of Waste chirped.

"Morning, Apsley."

"You know Sir Claud Huntbath?"

"Oh yes, we've met at conferences," said Sir John.

Sir Claud Huntbath was a lantern-jawed loose-limbed man with a pair of lush grey eyebrows, and a bald head as buff as one of the forms in the compilation of which he had spent so much of his patient and laborious existence.

"What will you have, Jackie?"

"Gin and angostura," said Sir John.

"And you, Huntbath?"

"A dry sherry, please."

For himself Mr. Apsley Howe ordered tomato juice.

"Surprised to find you drinking that stuff, Apsley," observed Sir John when the glasses arrived.

"I didn't know there was such a drink," Sir Claud observed in scholarly surprise.

"I got the habit when I was over in the United States," Mr. Howe explained. "Well, shall we go down to lunch?"

As they made a move toward the grim dining-room of the Heraeum the Minister of Waste asked the Minister of Production if he ever listened to the wireless.

"Can't say I do, Apsley. When I have a free evening I like to play bridge."

"I was broadcasting last night."

"So my man Hawkes told me. He said he recognised your voice at once."

"You ought to have a shot at it yourself, Jackie. The Prime Minister thinks it's a very good medium for keeping in touch with the electorate. Of course he's a great dab at it. They told me at the B.B.C. that except for one or two very popular comedians he's considered the greatest draw they have. But I think my own talk last night made quite an impression," the Minister of Waste went on modestly. "We were able to note the response to it at the Ministry even this morning. I think this Waste Crusade will stir up a good deal of keenness."

For a while the business of ordering food took up the attention of the three rulers of the country. If Sir John Bunting had suggested soup to start with, his host would probably have postponed until a richer dish the topic the discussion of which was the object of this lunch; but when Sir John Bunting declared for caviare Mr. Apsley Howe saw no reason to wait any longer.

"You're responsible, aren't you, Jackie, for rubber?" he asked.

"That's so," said Sir John, suspicion clouding for a moment the merry clarity of his blue eyes. He had long learnt to suspect such questions from a colleague in the Government.

"How's it going?" the host asked.

"Very well, I believe."

"Sir Claud and I were discussing before you arrived whether we were within our province in taking over the control of waste rubber," said Mr. Howe cautiously. "We don't want to butt in on any arrangements your Ministry may have made. However, if you haven't gone into the question of waste rubber we should definitely like to do so. We've just launched this crusade to collect and use the waste products of the country, and naturally we should like to include rubber among them. That's how you feel, isn't it, Sir Claud?"

"It may lead to overlapping otherwise," Sir Claud pointed out.

"Well, of course I don't want to do anything obstructive, Apsley," said Sir John. "But I really don't think I can give you an answer right off the reel. It wouldn't do for me to commit the Ministry without consulting Sir Bertram Pringle. Sir Claud will appreciate that."

"Oh certainly, we don't want to force your hand, Sir John," said the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Waste. "The Minister and I merely wanted to ascertain if you had any positive views about the problem of waste rubber because we do not want to interfere with any schemes you may be bearing in mind."

"And carefully considering," Mr. Howe added.

"The essence of the situation, as I see it," said Sir Claud, "is that there undoubtedly is a large amount of old rubber on wastegrounds and rubbish dumps in different parts of the country, and that there is probably a large amount lying about in private residences."

"For instance in our village," Mr. Howe put in, "you find the children have taken to using old motor-tyres as hoops. Well, after all there are the old-fashioned iron hoops, which are less inconvenient to passers-by and which, when no longer required by their youthful owners, can go to swell the reserves of old iron which we are proposing to build up all over the country. Can you do anything with old tyres at the Ministry of Production, Jackie?"

"Look here, Apsley, I'm not prepared to commit myself on this question. I mean to say I must have notice of that question, what?"

Sir John Bunting by now was tackling a plump woodcock, and was inclined to resent his enjoyment of it being interfered with by the persistency of his host.

"Well, will you consult with Sir Bertram Pringle and let me know later on to-day at the House?"

"To-day?" Sir John repeated in stupefaction. "My dear Apsley, you really couldn't expect Pringle to give me an answer to-day. This day fortnight perhaps. The

whole matter will have to be gone into carefully and borne in mind."

"Mr. Howe hasn't explained, Sir John, that we are holding up twenty million copies of a pamphlet we have just printed on account of this uncertainty about which Government Department is responsible for waste rubber. I realise that to-day *is* rather too soon to expect an answer. But if we could know your view this day week you could have our comments this day fortnight, and if we receive your further comments a week after that we should be able to reach a decision before Parliament rises, as to whether or not to incorporate our provisional scheme for the collection of waste rubber in a new pamphlet."

"Well, I'll do my best, Sir Claud, to give you the result of our investigations at the Ministry in a week. But I cannot promise anything. You understand that, Apsley? After all, you wouldn't promise anything without consulting Sir Claud."

"Certainly not," Mr. Howe agreed.

"I'll go this far, though, Apsley," Sir John continued—the claret had been well chosen by his host—"I'll say that, without having carefully considered the question and borne it in mind, I see no reason why the Ministry of Production should not take a benevolent view of your people's activities in the matter of waste rubber."

"After all, there is a lot of rubber wasted," Mr. Apsley Howe pressed, taking advantage of his colleague's recognition that the claret was a really good claret. "We could make a beginning at the Ministry itself by calling in all the old rubber-stamps and issuing new ones. What do you think about that suggestion, Sir Claud?"

"Offhand I should be inclined to say there might be something in it. It would have to be gone into, of course. I'll tell Cleaver to get out a report on it."

"And then there are rubber mats and raincoats," Mr. Howe went on.

"And what about these rubber sponges?" asked Sir

John, catching his colleague's enthusiasm. "Only this morning I told my man Hawkes to throw away my rubber sponge and get a new one for me."

"Exactly," Mr. Howe agreed eagerly. "And what will become of your old sponge?"

"God knows!" Sir John ejaculated fervidly.

"You may say it doesn't matter what does happen to one old rubber sponge. But think of the thousands and thousands of rubber sponges that must be thrown away every year. That's where we can learn something from the Germans. They wouldn't throw away rubber sponges."

"Of course they wouldn't, Apsley. I say, this is really a wonderful Mouton-Rothschild. No, I agree with you the Germans would discover a line for old rubber sponges. Probably turn them into petrol or something. But wait a minute, Apsley. Do we want to save rubber? My function as Minister of Production is to produce as much rubber as possible. I'm not sure that the more rubber that gets thrown away may not be to our advantage."

"But, excuse me, Sir John," Sir Claud Huntbath interposed; "as I see our waste rubber proposals, we are not planning to employ waste rubber for the manufacture of new rubber articles. The distinction between waste rubber and rubber waste should be carefully drawn. Rubber waste is undoubtedly your province. Our aim is to find a use for waste rubber in other directions. The Experimental Department of the Ministry will work on that. All Mr. Howe and I aim to secure is recognition of the Ministry of Waste's right to include waste rubber in the schedule of waste products listed for collection and possible canalisation into useful channels. However, I've no doubt my old friend Pringle will consider the question carefully and bear it in mind."

"I know he will, I know he will," Sir John barked. "He's very keen. Deuced keen. Keen as mustard. By

Jove, Apsley, I've just remembered another large item in waste rubber and that is . . ."

"Steady, Jackie, I think the Bishop of Poolchester is listening to our conversation."

Sir John Bunting looked across to where the Bishop of Poolchester was regarding him with an expression of ascetic disgust.

"I've sometimes thought of joining the Heraeum," he said. "But I think it's too full of bishops. I never know what to talk about to a bishop."

Sir Claud Huntbath evidently thought that the lunch was moving away from its object.

"We were going to ask Sir John about the question of fruit and vegetable refuse," he reminded his Minister.

"Ah yes, I'm glad you reminded me," said the latter. "You knew, didn't you, Jackie, that there had been a little difficulty between your people and ours about the refuse in Covent Garden Market?"

"I'd heard something about it," Sir John admitted. "But the question of fruit and vegetables is a very ticklish one. We've been having trouble with the people at the Ministry of Agriculture about fruit and vegetables. What it boils down to, Apsley, is that it's almost impossible to lay down any hard and fast rule where fruit and vegetable refuse begins. We're aiming at revolutionising the whole of the British fruit and vegetable industry, and I'm so afraid that if you fellows start trying to lay down where superfluity ends and refuse begins we shall get in a jam. Talking of jam, I know you're naturally interested in the fruit output, Apsley."

The Minister of Waste winced. This was the very innuendo against which his Principal Private Secretary had warned him.

"As a jam-maker I'm not interested in refuse," he said reproachfully.

"My dear fellow, I never supposed you were," said Sir John. "But seriously, I wish you'd leave this Covent

Garden business to us. Frankly, we'd much rather that the system by which the L.C.C. disposes of it was maintained. If you start trying to make it into jam . . ."

"I don't want to make it into jam," Mr. Howe interrupted petulantly. "However, if you're satisfied that no waste is involved, we are not anxious to press this point."

"By no means," Sir Claud confirmed.

"Well, it would certainly help us if you left fruit and vegetable refuse out of your arrangements," said Sir John. "And I know I can promise that the question of waste rubber which you have raised will get much more sympathetic consideration from my Ministry if I can tell Pringle that Covent Garden refuse is a closed book so far as the Ministry of Waste is concerned."

Mr. Howe looked at Sir Claud Huntbath.

"We are certainly anxious to give every assistance at the Ministry of Waste to prevent any kind of overlapping in Government activities," Sir Claud declared. "Personally, I am most willing to see eye to eye with Sir John Bunting in this matter, and I appreciate extremely his sympathetic consideration of our interest in waste rubber."

"Well, let's go upstairs and take our coffee," Mr. Howe suggested. "It's wonderful, isn't it, how many complicated outstanding questions can be settled if people will only get together and talk things over personally," he added, gazing round the grim dining-room of the Heraeum from wonder-softened eyes.

"It's the only way," Sir John affirmed. "They used to grumble at the way Lloyd George went careering about all over Europe to conferences, but there was a lot to be said for it. However, it didn't go down well with the electorate."

After half an hour over coffee and brandy and cigars, during which the conversation has no bearing on matters of state and is therefore not worth recording, the two Ministers of the Crown drove to the House of Commons and Sir Claud Huntbath walked back to Wharton House.

Later that afternoon in one of the fidgety rooms of the House of Commons Mr. Apsley Howe gave tea to a prominent supporter of his from the Wessex town of Chalkhampton. He always felt that such hospitality marked him down as one of the most genuinely democratic members of the Unionist Party. He delighted to nod affably to one of the wild men from Clydeside and then ask his visitor if he had recognised who *that* was. It was such a pleasure to see the visitor's surprise at the way two Members (and one a Cabinet Minister) from the opposite extremes of political opinion could be so friendly outside the arena.

"Was that really David Maxwood?"

"Oh yes, he's a great friend of mine. Charming fellow!"

"But his political opinions?"

"Oh well, of course we don't take them seriously on our side of the House. That's what foreigners can never understand. They can't understand the way Englishmen can fight one another over politics and yet be the greatest friends in the smoking-room. Foreigners don't grasp the meaning of sportsmanship."

And the visitor sipping his tea would reflect on his many blessings and privileges as one of a superior race.

The Minister of Waste had not yet had an opportunity this afternoon to surprise his prominent supporter, a Mr. Gammon who owned a prosperous brewery in Chalkhampton and was believed to command not less than a couple of hundred votes. He was just thinking what a pity it was none of his Clydeside friends had stopped to exchange some genial chaff so that Mr. Gammon could carry back to Chalkhampton the news of his affability to all sorts and conditions of men, when Jamie MacSwiggan, the burly member for North Porwich, stopped by the table at which his prominent supporter was being entertained.

"Whit hae ye been doing to the British Museum,

mon?" he asked, assuming a much broader Doric than he ordinarily used in order to give Mr. Apsley Howe the satisfaction of feeling that nobody in the House was quite so good as himself at understanding what those wild men of Clydeside (awfully decent fellows when you get to know them) were saying.

"The British Museum, Jamie?" Mr. Howe repeated.

"Ay, mon, it's in the last edition of the *Moon*. Hae ye no' seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The lady you sent from your Ministry to the British Museum with a china vase on her heid."

"Lady with a . . . with a . . . what did you say, Jamie?" Mr. Apsley Howe asked, a sudden foreboding upon him.

Jamie MacSwiggan came back in a moment with the paper, and pointed to the paragraph:

AMAZING SCENE IN BRITISH MUSEUM THE CRUSADE AGAINST WASTE

An unusual exhibit might have met the eyes of visitors to the mummy room in the British Museum this morning when an unmarried woman was observed by an attendant to take from beneath her coat a china vase and, after placing it upon her head, stand motionless in what was described to a *Moon* man as an "archaic attitude". On being asked for an explanation of her amazing behaviour it is understood that the woman, who declined to give her name, explained she was "doing her bit" in the nation-wide crusade against waste which was launched last night by Mr. Apsley Howe in a broadcast talk from the B.B.C.

Enquiries made at Broadcasting House elicited that officials there were unaware of anything in the talk by the Minister of Waste which could have inspired action on the lines taken in the mummy room this morning. Officials at the Ministry of Waste professed surprise on hearing of the incident and gave a categorical denial to the suggestion that she had been encouraged by the Ministry to take what is characterised as "this extraordinary step". It is under-

stood that Mr. Apsley Howe has ordered stringent enquiries into the origin of what remains for the present a mystery. Meanwhile, the woman herself is being detained pending enquiries.

The salary list of the Ministry of Waste is £454,523 a year, and the cost of the Crusade against Waste is estimated to run into many millions of pounds.

"These confounded newspapers!" Mr. Apsley Howe ejaculated when he had read through this paragraph. "I suppose you didn't hear my broadcast, Jamie?"

"No, I didna hear it. But the wee wifie heard it. Och, she said it wisna sae bad at a'. She liked it fine."

"I listened to you, Mr. Howe," said the prominent constituent. "And in my humble opinion you put your finger right on the spot. And Mrs. Gammon agreed with me. Yes, I think you'll have all the ladies on your side. What did Lady Lavinia say?"

"Oh, my wife was very encouraging about it."

"She would be," said Mr. Gammon, shaking his pendulous chins approvingly. "She's a wonderful woman, is Lady Lavinia. We're very proud of her in Chalkhampton," he added, turning to Jamie MacSwiggan.

"Och, it's the wives and mithers we maun listen to. That's what I like about my boy Wullie. Wullie never daes a thing wi'oot consulting his mither first. He's working doon here in London as a solicitor, but he writes his mither three times a week as regular as clockwork. Just now she's doon in London hersel', and och, Wullie's just in his element. Have you a boy, Mr. Gammon? I ken you have nae bairns, Apsley."

"I have two boys, Mr. MacSwiggan, and I'm proud to say they are both devoted to their mother."

"Och, I'm telling you, Mr. Gammon, sae long as Britons listen to their mithers we'll be all richt in Britain."

And with this Mr. James MacSwiggan, the Member for North Porwich, went back to the House to denounce the behaviour of the Government in raising the price of milk

twopence a gallon as the foulest act of irresponsible tyranny perpetrated by any body of men since the worst excesses of Czardom.

"You're facing red revolution, you baby-robbers," he shouted from the other side of the House at the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Chapter Five

A DIFFICULT AFTERNOON

AT the Ministry of Waste Oliver Huffam had spent the most exhausting afternoon he could remember since he entered the Civil Service. Besides having to answer telephone calls from Press agencies and news editors he had had a painful interview with the Permanent Secretary whose favour he had so long enjoyed, and who now seemed convinced that the incident at the British Museum was due to lack of forethought on his part.

"I cannot understand why you sent this woman to the British Museum, Huffam," Sir Claud had exclaimed fretfully. "When you saw those teaspoons in her hair why didn't you send her to Hanwell or Colney Hatch?"

"Excuse me, Sir Claud, I do not think it is possible to send people to lunatic asylums without a medical certificate, and she declined to say where she lived. My object was to get her out of the Ministry as quickly as possible."

"Yes, I appreciate your intention. But the British Museum! Why the British Museum?"

And Oliver Huffam had been unable to produce any good reason why he had sent Miss Quekett to the British Museum. The Permanent Secretary would not have understood that the British Museum was the first place which came into his head when his impulse to set Miss Quekett down outside Westminster Abbey had been rejected on account of the nearness of the Abbey to Whitehall.

"I gathered somehow from the woman that she wanted to go to the British Museum," he had told the Permanent Secretary.

"It's so unlike you, Huffam, to jump to conclusions like that," Sir Claud had commented reproachfully. "I've

always relied so implicitly on your caution. You used to be such an adept at diverting impulsive action into no thoroughfares. My chief reason in asking you to take on the job of Principal Private Secretary to the Minister was my confidence in your ability to discourage him from trying to move too fast."

"I appreciate that, Sir Claud. I think it would have been all right if he hadn't given that broadcast talk last night. I tried to stop him, and I wrote him out a perfectly harmless talk. But he insisted on adding that bit about being the nation's rag and bone man, and it was that which did the damage."

"And the vase this wretched woman stuck on her head? It was in point of fact a . . ." the bushy eyebrows of the Permanent Secretary supplied the substantive.

"Yes, Sir Claud. The other five were smashed. Pond and I were anxious to get the survivor out of the Ministry at all costs, and I instructed Perkins to place it in the taxi. Normally she would have had to surrender such a piece of china before passing through the turnstile . . ."

"If you'd sent her to the Zoo," the Permanent Secretary had exclaimed.

"That would undoubtedly have been the best place," Huffam had agreed. "Unfortunately I never thought of the Zoo. But I am still at a loss to know how she did get the . . . the utensil into the mummy-room. It suggests a grave lack of co-ordination between the various branches of the Museum executive."

"Well, fortunately that's not our business. I've been in communication with the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities over the telephone, and I think it has been clearly established that *we* have no responsibility for the introduction of the piece of china. The question for us is whether we can avoid any further publicity."

"In my conversations with various Press representatives over the telephone, I think I have succeeded in persuading them that the woman was merely a harmless

eccentric. Luckily both Pond and Perkins have been most discreet and nothing has leaked out . . . nothing has transpired, I should say, of the wreckage in the waiting-room this morning."

"That concluding paragraph in the *Moon* was very offensive, I thought."

"You mean about the salaries of the Ministry, Sir Claud?"

"Exactly. Before we know where we are we shall have some of these confounded I.L.P. fellows asking questions to earn themselves a bit of cheap publicity in their constituencies. It was that paragraph at the end which particularly upset the Minister. He asked if we ought to issue a public disclaimer of this woman's action, but I managed to calm him down. And you think you have arranged matters with the Press, Huffam?"

"I think so, Sir Claud. I can't express my regret for having involuntarily been the cause of all this unpleasantness . . ."

"All right, Huffam, don't worry any more about it. After all, what's done can't be undone, and it's no use crying over spilt milk."

"That's true, Sir Claud."

But as Oliver Huffam walked back to his room from that interview with the Permanent Secretary, he felt acutely that he had imperilled his whole future in the Civil Service by those rash instructions to Perkins that the taxi-driver was to take Miss Quekett to the British Museum.

"Lady Lavinia has been on the telephone," Upwey announced when he reached his room. "She sounded a little annoyed. It appears that a lot of rubbish has just been left at her house, and she wants us to send somebody from the Ministry to clear it away."

"Not more china?"

"She didn't mention china. She only mentioned a perambulator and some rusty birdcages. But I gathered that there was a lot of other rubbish."

"I say, Upwey, for goodness' sake don't talk about rubbish. We're trying so hard to get people waste-conscious, and you call it rubbish."

"I see your point, Huffam. Yes, I must watch that. But meanwhile what are we to do about this waste material which Lady Lavinia so much objects to?"

"I'd better speak to her," said the Principal Private Secretary in the hollow and sepulchral voice of the old-fashioned Christmas ghost. He took up the receiver wearily.

"Get through to Sloane 12568 and ask if Lady Lavinia Howe will speak to Mr. Oliver Huffam. . . . Is that her Ladyship speaking? . . . oh, good-afternoon, Lady Lavinia, this is the Minister's Principal Private Secretary speaking . . . yes, we're extremely sorry to hear you have been put to so much inconvenience . . . yes, but I know he's extremely busy in the House this afternoon . . . I have been unable to get into communication with him myself . . . I wanted to let you know that we are going into the question of the inconvenience . . . I beg your pardon? . . . an old bath is now on the pavement outside your front door? . . . oh dear, I'm really . . . but unfortunately we have no machinery at the Ministry itself for dealing with such articles . . . yes, quite, quite, but I don't think the Minister envisaged such a rapid response to his appeal last night . . . he made it clear to listeners that they were to do nothing until they received a pamphlet from the Ministry instructing them how to deal with the problem of accumulated waste . . . yes, quite, quite . . . I'm very much afraid that's impossible, Lady Lavinia . . . oh, if I may say so, I do not think that would be a solution . . . we've already had trouble with the British Museum to-day, and I'm afraid the B.B.C. would not have the necessary machinery for dealing with such articles . . . but I do see how unpleasant it is for you . . . but couldn't the constable on your beat take appropriate action? Nobody has any right to leave old baths outside private houses . . . but couldn't the per-

ambulator be put beside the bath, and the birdcages too for that matter? . . . but we have no machinery for that purpose at the Ministry . . . the details of the organisation of District Controllers of Waste are still under consideration . . . I could not answer that question, Lady Lavinia, but I understand that it was the only date the B.B.C. had vacant, and the Minister was most anxious to get the crusade launched . . . oh, I can assure you the whole business was very carefully considered and borne in mind for a long time before it was decided to take action . . . no, I quite realise that, Lady Lavinia . . . yes, I do appreciate the inconvenience for you . . . I hardly know what to suggest . . . perhaps your butler could get into touch with the police and take their opinion . . . it is most unfortunate . . . anti-social really . . .”

“She’s rung off,” Huffam told his colleague. “You’d better warn the Janitor that further waste material may reach the Ministry in the course of the afternoon. Lady Lavinia seemed very determined.”

The telephone-bell rang again.

“Will you speak to the B.B.C.?” Upwey asked with his hand over the receiver.

Huffam took it from him.

“Hullo, this is the Ministry of Waste . . . yes . . . yes . . . the Minister’s Principal Private Secretary speaking. . . . Mr. Howe himself is at the House of Commons . . . would he object to an S.O.S. before the six o’clock news? Not at all, I’m sure . . . yes, if you’d be good enough . . . one moment, please, I’ll take a note of the terms in which the announcement is couched . . . the Minister of Waste thanks listeners who have already sent gifts of waste material to him personally and greatly appreciates the spirit in which such gifts are offered, but he asks that no more such waste material should be sent until the instructions about the collection of waste material which will be issued to all householders in due course have been received . . . yes, I think that’s perfectly clear . . . though

might I suggest that we should prefer you to use the word 'contribution' rather than 'gift'. The Minister is anxious the public should understand that we are paying for any waste we collect . . . thank you, if you would change 'gift' to 'contribution' it might avoid misunderstanding in the future . . . I beg your pardon? . . . oh, I think we must ask you to deal with that . . . we have no machinery at the Ministry . . . no, of course not . . . quite, quite. I fully realise what a nuisance it must have been with waste material coming in at the B.B.C. all day . . . no, of course not . . . most unsuitable in Portland Place . . . however, I think your announcement before the six o'clock news should prevent any recurrence of what has been happening to-day . . . yes, we're sorry about that incident at the British Museum . . . one would think the Press had something better to write about . . . however, we have taken appropriate steps and hope that the last has now been heard of it . . . good-bye."

"Apparently the B.B.C. has been getting waste material deposited there all day," Huffam told the Assistant Private Secretary.

The telephone rang again.

"The Minister wants to speak to you," Upwey announced.

"Huffam speaking, sir . . . the police at the House have just directed a lorry carrying scrap iron and other waste material to the Ministry? . . . yes, sir, certainly I will immediately instruct the Janitor to take suitable steps to divert it elsewhere . . . no, certainly it shall not be sent to the British Museum . . . yes, indeed, I very much regret the Press should have got hold of the story, but I think I have been successful in stopping any mention of it in the morning papers . . . I'm afraid Lady Lavinia has been having trouble in Eaton Square . . . she rang up to ask if we could send along from the Ministry to collect an old bath, a perambulator, some birdcages, and various other items of waste sent in by those who had heard your broad-

cast . . . I suggested the help of the police should be enlisted . . . I took it you would not want the stuff sent round to you at the Ministry . . . yes, I think she *was* a little worried, sir . . . the bath and the perambulator presented rather a formidable problem . . . she seemed less worried by the birdcages . . . oh, I don't think *you* need worry . . . the matter is bound to adjust itself . . . I have just been in communication with the B.B.C. and they are planning to publish a special announcement before the six o'clock news impressing on the public the advisability of retaining all waste material until they receive our pamphlet . . . yes, I understand from Sir Claud that, pending the comments of the Ministry of Production on our proposals as to the collection of waste rubber and our further comments together with their further comments, it will be better to postpone the circulation of our pamphlet . . . it might almost be advisable to postpone the circulation of our pamphlet until after Christmas . . . quite, quite, sir, there certainly is always a lot of waste after Christmas, and it would give our crusade a very fine start off in the New Year . . . no, I really don't think you need bother any more about that paragraph in the *Moon* . . . I think the incident may be regarded as definitely closed . . . I beg pardon, sir, I didn't quite . . . well, sir, if you wish it I will certainly go round to your house . . . you think I should hire a station-omnibus and remove everything . . . yes, I suppose the stuff *could* be left on a piece of wasteground somewhere . . . unless of course Lady Lavinia has meanwhile enlisted the help of the police immediately responsible for public order and decency in Eaton Square . . . you won't be able to get away from the House till late . . . I'll tell Lady Lavinia . . . all right, sir, I shall do my best."

The Principal Private Secretary hung up the receiver.

"Get through again to Sloane 12568, will you, Upwey?" he groaned.

"Anything serious the matter?" the Assistant Private Secretary asked sympathetically.

"The Minister wants me to take appropriate action in the matter of this waste material at his house. Tell the butler that unless he has made prior arrangements steps will be taken to deal with the waste material which has been accumulating there during the day."

Huffam hoped to hear that prior arrangements had been made at 189 Eaton Square, but he was disappointed.

"I think the butler was pretty relieved to get your message," Upwey told him. "What are you going to do?"

"Order a station-omnibus, will you? Better ring Victoria. What time? Oh, as soon as they can send it along."

Oliver Huffam suddenly recollected that the Levetts and the Pettiwards were dining with Gertrude and himself to-night at eight. It was now a quarter past five. If he could be at 189 Eaton Square by six, the conveyance ought to be able to reach some fairly secluded place by a quarter to seven, where the waste material could be deposited. But it might be prudent to postpone dinner till eight-thirty. He would ring Gertrude.

"Hullo, is that you, dear? Olly speaking. Look here, I've got an unexpected job to do for the Minister, and it may keep me rather late. Will you ring up the Levetts and the Pettiwards and make it half-past eight for dinner? I'm extremely sorry, but this job must be finished, I'm afraid. Yes, it is rather a bore but it can't be helped. And if I'm not back in time to warm the claret, see that Mabel doesn't boil it. Sorry to alter your arrangements, dear. Good-bye."

"The station people want to know whether to send a large or a small 'bus," Upwey came in to ask.

"Oh, I should imagine a small one would be enough."

"I gathered from Lady Lavinia there was a lot of other

stuff besides the perambulator and the birdcages," Upwey said.

"Well, perhaps they'd better send a large one. How long will it be?"

"I'll find out the measurements."

"No, no, I mean how long a time."

Huffam debated for a moment or two whether he should not depute Upwey to carry out the task of removing the gratuitous waste material from 189 Eaton Square. His long lank form stiffened. No! He would redeem his lapse of this morning over the British Museum. He would not give way to the time-honoured habit in the Civil Service of shelving responsibility.

Under the shock of the Minister's request that he should disengage his house of the waste material, Huffam forgot the lorryload of scrap iron which had been directed by the police at the Houses of Parliament to the Ministry of Waste, and when he went down to the entrance-lobby to meet the station-omnibus, which had been notified as being on the way, he found the lorry drawn up in front of Wharton House, where Pond and Perkins were engaged in a heated argument with the driver, while Principal Assistant Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, Principals and Assistant Principals of the Ministry of Waste hurried across the courtyard with averted eyes, their day's work done.

"I don't intend to be —d about no more, and that's all there is to it," the driver was asserting as Huffam came out through the swing-doors.

"You'll take your orders from me," Sergeant-Major Pond retorted. "And my orders are to clear out of here and shut your mouth."

"Didn't the police outside Parliament direct me to this dogs' island?" the driver demanded.

"That's what you say," Sergeant Perkins, V.C., put in.

"And in fact you're calling me a blurry liar?" the driver asked truculently.

"I never said so, did I?"

"Leave this to me, Perkins," said the Janitor. "Now look here, young fellow, what you've got to get into your head is that what the police outside Parliament says doesn't go for any more here than if they were police outside a public-house. They've got Parliament to look after. I've got Wharton House to look after. See what I mean? Now don't use any more abusive language, but clear off out of it."

"And where am I to put this blurry load of old iron I'm carrying?" the driver demanded.

"Where the monkey put the nuts," Sergeant Perkins threw in.

"Yes, and you ought to know all about where monkeys put nuts, you did," the driver jeered.

"I wish you'd let me handle this, Perkins," said the Janitor reproachfully.

"There you are, listen to what your keeper's telling you and hold your mouth. If it *is* a mouth. And which I wouldn't be shore of."

Sergeant Perkins, V.C., purpled. He had not disarmed twelve Jerries in the Ypres Salient and gathered up the remains of five more this morning to be taunted by a lorry-driver. He was on the verge of leaping from the morass of words to the terra firma of deeds when Huffam, seized by a sudden idea, intervened.

"Perhaps you could tell us who commissioned you to take this load of scrap iron to the Houses of Parliament?" he asked the driver.

"It was for delivery to the Right Honourable Apsley Howe," the driver replied, fingering a piece of paper, and looking at it to check the correctness of his assertion. "The Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P., House of Commons, Westminster. And I was given instructions there to deliver it at the Ministry of Waste, Wharton House. This is the Ministry of Waste, isn't it?"

"Perfectly correct," Huffam assured him smoothly. "But who commissioned you to deliver this load to Mr. Apsley Howe?"

"Six Grateful Listeners."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Six Grateful Listeners. Here you are, if you don't believe me, it's written down."

"Anonymous, eh?" Huffam observed.

"No, Hodford."

"Hodford?"

"That's right. Hodford, Herts."

"Not so much as me Hodford won't," Sergeant Perkins, V.C. growled to himself.

Sergeant-Major Pond clicked his tongue and eyed the Assistant Janitor reproachfully.

"I see," said Huffam. "This scrap iron was collected by six residents in Hodford and despatched by them to Mr. Apsley Howe?"

"That's right. They was collecting it in and about Hodford ever since seven o'clock this morning, and there's more to come they told me."

"Well, I'm extremely sorry you've had your long drive for nothing, but I'm afraid we must ask you to take your load back and tell the gentlemen who collected it that we will communicate with them in due course. Here's ten shillings for your trouble."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure I didn't want to cause any upset. Only, you'll understand, it was the police outside Parliament who sent me here?"

"That's quite understood," Huffam assured him. "By the way, I suppose you'll be dumping your load somewhere when you get back to Hodford? I suppose there's plenty of wasteground round Hodford?"

"Oh yes, I'll find a place to dump it all right."

"You couldn't take anything else in your lorry, could you?" Huffam asked. "A few birdcages and that sort of thing?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't, sir. I'm loaded to the maximum of the two tons I'm allowed to carry."

"All right. I perfectly understand. I suppose the field where you'll dump this iron will be on the outskirts of Hodford."

"Yes, I'll probably dump it in Nobbs' Bottom."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nobbs' Bottom. That's a bit of rough ground about a half mile this side of the town. Mostly stuff gets dumped there."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry you've had your drive for nothing," said Huffam. "And if you'll kindly tell the six gentlemen who hired your lorry . . ."

"One was a lady, Mrs. Chicksands."

"Chicksands?"

"That's right. And she does keep chickings too, which is funny if you come to think of it. Mrs. Chicksands, Lilac Villa, Hodford." The driver suddenly wrung his hand. "Now I've done it. Don't mention as I told you Mrs. Chicksands' name, if you don't mind, sir. I was asked not to say who any of the six was. You'll understand it all sounded a bit barmy to me. Only, after all, I got this lorry to hire and nobody doesn't like to refuse a job just because it seems a bit barmy, do they?"

"Well, will you be good enough to tell the gentlemen and lady who collected the iron that Mr. Apsley Howe is very grateful and that in due course the Ministry of Waste will send to collect it from Nobbs' Bottom, I think you said?"

"That's right, Nobbs'. Some says Nobbs's but mostly you'll hear it called Nobbs'. Well, I may as well be going along. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night to you."

The driver mounted to the cab of the lorry.

"So long, 'Aig." This was to Sergeant-Major Pond. "And regards to the monkey-house when you get home, Mussalunny." This was to Sergeant Perkins, V.C.

And after scratching himself under the arm as a derisive gesture of farewell, the driver concentrated upon steering his way out of the courtyard of Wharton House. It needed concentration too, for at this moment what seemed to Huffam's eyes a pantechicon but was actually an outsize station-omnibus entered it.

The lorry-driver leaned round the side of his cab.

"They've come for you at last, Cripping," he shouted to Sergeant Perkins, V.C.

Chapter Six

BUT A MORE DIFFICULT EVENING

THE outside of 189 Eaton Square looked like an interlude in the process of moving into or out of it. The bath which had so much irritated Lady Lavinia showed long and pale against the railings of the area in the light of a near-by street-lamp. The lid of a dustbin leant against it. A perambulator flanked it on one side, a mangle with but a single roller on the other. Huffam shuddered as he went up the steps and pressed the bell.

"I'm afraid you've been having rather a lot of trouble," he said to Dawkins.

"It has been rather a heavy day, sir," said the butler, looking round at the hall crowded with lumber and junk of every description, while the footman took Huffam's hat and coat.

"Mr. Howe and I have arranged to relieve you," said the Principal Private Secretary, with the mirthless smile of the bureaucrat.

"So we understood from Mr. Upwey, sir, over the telephone. Her Ladyship would be glad to see you for a moment."

Huffam followed Dawkins upstairs to the drawing-room.

"My god, Mr. Huffam, what on earth does the Minister think he's playing at?" Lady Lavinia exclaimed, rising from her chair by the fire, and tossing her chestnut mane in high-spirited indignation.

"It has been rather unfortunate, Lady Lavinia."

"Unfortunate!" she neighed shrilly. "It's been a damned disaster. I'll have to have the house disinfected. Would you like a whisky? Give Mr. Huffam a whisky, Dawkins."

"Not for me, thank you, Lady Lavinia."

"Give Mr. Huffam a brandy, Dawkins."

"No, thank you, nothing really . . ."

"You're not a teetotaler?"

"No, no, but I never drink between meals."

"My god!" Lady Lavinia muttered to herself. "Don't go away, Dawkins," she added sharply. "We have to decide what is to be done with this ghastly collection of rubbish that has been unloaded on us."

"Please do not put yourself about . . ." Huffam began.

"I don't intend to," Lady Lavinia interjected sharply.

"You have a wireless set . . ."

"There's a beastly contraption I sent down to the servants' hall, what of it?"

"I was going to suggest you should listen to the six o'clock news—it's just ten minutes to six now—and you would hear . . ."

"I don't want to hear anything on the wireless. If this degraded muck is the result of wireless, it's an even more detestable invention than I supposed it to be."

"The B.B.C. are making a special announcement before the six o'clock news, asking the public not to send any waste material until they receive instructions from the Ministry about the right course to be pursued. I thought it might relieve your mind to know you were not likely to be bothered any more. We've had a good deal of trouble down at the Ministry itself, and even Mr. Howe was seriously worried by a consignment which was delivered at the House."

"I'm delighted to hear it. What kind of sanitary arrangements did *he* get?"

"Oh, nothing except a lorryload of scrap iron."

"Serve him right!"

"It's hardly fair to blame the Minister for the stupidity of the public."

"Yes, it is," Lady Lavinia snapped. "He's been a Member of Parliament since 1918. He ought to know by now how stupid the public are."

Dawkins coughed discreetly.

"I don't want anything, Dawkins," his mistress nickered.

"Very good, my lady. I shall be in the front hall if Mr. Huffam desires to consult me."

"It's a matter of getting everything packed into that conveyance I have brought for the purpose," said Huffam quickly.

"Oh, you're going to take that beastly stuff away, are you?" Lady Lavinia asked.

"That is the intention, Lady Lavinia. The Minister was most anxious you should not be bothered more than could be helped. He asked me to let you know that he is likely to be kept late at the House to-night and will dine there. I think, if you will excuse me, I should like to get this waste material loaded up now."

"Where are you taking it?"

"We have made arrangements at the Ministry for its bestowal."

"What happened to that female lunatic who arrived this morning with a very queer cargo? I sent *her* round with a card of introduction to the Minister."

"We explained to her that the Minister could not accept the responsibility of becoming the personal recipient of the waste material that is the object of the crusade he launched over the wireless last night. Now *will* you excuse me, Lady Lavinia? I am most anxious to dis-embarrass you of these misdirected contributions to the nation-wide drive against waste?"

"Well, I'm glad it's your job, not mine, Mr. Huffam. However, I really am obliged to you. You'd better have a bit on Tarara for the Cambridgeshire. The odds shortened to-day. You'd better get your money on quickly. Have you backed Tarara yet, Dawkins?"

"I have, thank you very much, my lady. I obtained 100 to 8 this morning."

"She's shortened to tens to-night."

"So I observed, my lady. I was extremely gratified I took your advice in good time."

A minute or two later Huffam was watching the loading of the station-omnibus.

"One might almost suppose you were bound for your seaside holidays, sir," said Dawkins when the bath and the perambulator crowned the top of the conveyance. "I wonder if you'd mind having these birdcages inside with you? They're apt to bounce about rather on top. And I think those two coalscuttles could stand comfortably here without inconveniencing you. The mangle on top, William." This was addressed to the footman.

The final item of waste was a triple-burner paraffin cooking-stove which Huffam thought was quite the dirtiest-looking object he had ever seen. The driver of the 'bus evidently shared his opinion.

"Aren't you going to wrap anything round that?" he asked William indignantly. "If it makes my 'bus half as black as what it's made your hands, I'll be spending all to-morrow cleaning it up."

"Get some large pieces of brown paper, William," Dawkins commanded majestically.

The paraffin-stove was wrapped up as well as could be managed, but by the time it had been hoisted on the top of the 'bus William's face was as black as his hands.

"Queerest lot of luggage I ever saw," the driver grumbled to himself.

"Where is he to drive to, sir?" Dawkins asked.

"Hodford," said Huffam.

"Hodford?" the driver echoed in disgusted amazement. "I thought we were going to Victoria."

"Hodford," said Huffam firmly.

"Hodford," Dawkins repeated with equal firmness.

"But that's twenty miles out of London," the driver argued. "This is a station-'bus, sir. They must have made a mistake and sent me when you were wanting a goods van."

"I really cannot spend my time arguing," said Huffam. "Your office received instructions from the Ministry of Waste. Please drive me to Hodford. I will give you further instructions where when I have ascertained the precise whereabouts of a certain place half a mile this side of Hodford. Good-night, Dawkins."

"Good-night, sir, and a pleasant journey. Mind the coalscuttles, sir, as you get in. Right away, driver."

In spite of Dawkins's good advice Huffam did not mind the coalscuttles and barked his shin over them as the 'bus started with an irritable leap forward, which made the birdcages shiver in the seats they occupied.

As the 'bus neared Grosvenor Gardens the driver turned round and, pushing back the glass screen, said he supposed it would be best to take the North Circular Road.

"Whatever way is quickest," the fare replied. "When do you think we shall reach the outskirts of Hodford?"

"About an hour from now if we're lucky, but an hour and a quarter more likely. There's a lot of traffic on the road about this time."

Huffam sighed. It looked as if even with dinner at half-past eight he was not going to be punctual.

The drive from Eaton Square to Hodford was a gloomy one. The driver thought about his tea, which he usually took soon after six and which he was now not likely to get before nine, if then. The fare thought about his dinner, to which he had expected to sit down at eight. He wondered if Gertrude would remember to prevent Mabel's boiling the claret. He wondered if the Pettiwads would arrive five minutes early as they always did, and if he himself would arrive in time to dress for dinner; and, as the mist which had crept over London at dusk turned to a drizzle of fine rain, he began to wonder if he would even arrive in time for dinner at all. From time to time when the station-'bus turned a corner one or two birdcages

would fall from the seat. Huffam asked himself why people were so precipitate. What a warning this abominable evening was against precipitancy! He had never thought his Chief's idea to launch this nation-wide crusade against waste with a broadcast was a sound idea. And how right he had been to distrust it! Superior people jeered at the Civil Service for its slowness and circumlocution and obstruction and red tape, and here was the result of abandoning the methods which had been tested by the experience of so many years in pursuit of this modern mania for the slapdash and the superficial. And the mortifying part of it all was that he himself had been caught up in the mad rush. He could look back to the moment he had entered the Home Office as an Assistant Principal (nay, far beyond that to the moment when he had first passed through the doors of St. James's School as a twelve-year-old scholar determined to become a worthy Civil Servant) and assure himself that never for a single instant had his conduct failed to uphold the highest traditions of the Civil Service until this miserable morning when he had told Perkins to send that creature to the British Museum. True, he might plead he had been distracted by the barrage of china, but the fact remained that he had himself acted precipitately. He had not carefully considered and borne in mind what might be the consequence of sending that woman to the British Museum in a taxi ordered and paid for by the Assistant Janitor of the Ministry of Waste. There were good grounds for hoping that his efforts to bridle the licence of the Press would not be without avail. That scurrilous paragraph in the *Moon* might be all the general public ever heard of the business, but that was a small consolation for his own rash and disordered act, for which this journey in a station-omnibus through the northern suburbs with these disgusting bird-cages was a well-deserved punishment. He peered into the rain, and read above a cinema the title of the evening's film in bleary lights—WASTED LIVES.

"Thank God we don't have to deal with them at the Ministry," he sighed to himself.

Gertrude would be worried if he was late for dinner. She would have to decide whether to begin without him. He could not recall that once during their life together had she been confronted by such a dilemma. Punctuality was natural to both of them. They had both been so punctual on their wedding-day that it had almost been embarrassing. Joan and Nigel had inherited that punctuality. It was a joy to have such children. A vision irradiated the murk of the omnibus for Huffam. He saw the clock on the mantelpiece of the dining-room standing at the stroke of eight. He saw the table spread for breakfast. And as the clock began to strike the hour he saw Gertrude and Joan and Nigel coming into the room, the bloom of perfect punctuality upon their complexions. The vision faded. The driver swerved to avoid some pedestrian crossing the road oblivious of what the Ministry of Transport had done to lower the monthly death-rate of pedestrians by at least one per cent. Birdcages tumbled over one another to the floor. The gloomy present reigned supreme again.

Punctuality was a quality which cemented friendships. The Levetts and the Pettiwards were both punctual. Jim Pettiward indeed was if anything too punctual. He was not happy if he was not before his time. Jim and Mona would reach Gloucester Road Station by twenty past eight at the latest. That meant they would be in the drawing-room of 9 Chillingham Gardens by five-and-twenty past eight. Gertrude, of course, would remember the Pettiward promptitude and would be waiting for them. Mark and Enid Levett would enter at exactly half-past eight. Old Mark prided himself on his exactitude. It was a standing joke at the Ministry of Production that the clocks there regulated themselves by Mark Levett.

Huffam sighed deeply. He had been planning to pull old Mark's leg about that Covent Garden refuse, but you

couldn't pull the leg of a man like Mark Levett if you'd kept him waiting ten minutes for his dinner. Ten minutes? Would that it might be no longer than ten minutes! He pushed back the glass screen to ask the driver how far they were from Hodford.

"Another twelve miles," said the driver surlily, and at that moment something fell from the roof of the omnibus into the road.

"Something fell, didn't it?" the driver asked, putting on his brake.

"It doesn't matter. Drive on," Huffam replied.

But it went against the driver's moral grain to let a piece of luggage fall from the roof of his 'bus without stopping to rescue it. In any case people in the street were shouting 'Oy!' 'Oy!'

The omnibus stopped and the driver got down.

It was the triple-burner paraffin-stove which had fallen. The brown paper in which William had wrapped it had burst asunder. The foul relic of domestic misuse and neglect sprawled in the roadway.

Before the driver could reach the stove two boy-scouts, homing after a half-holiday of sylvan manoeuvre, rushed to seize the chance to perform their day's good deed of which military necessity had deprived them. In a few moments they were as black as the imaginary Matabeles they had spent the afternoon in stalking.

"Dirty little varmints," a large unappreciative woman with a bag of tomatoes paused to observe on the pavement's edge to a small and equally unappreciative woman carrying mixed groceries in a string-bag. "I'd like to catch my Elbert mucking himself up like that. I'd tan the hide off of him, I would."

"We had that nosey parker of a new curate round at our house last week wanting our Ted and Perce to join the boy-scouts," the small woman sniffed. "But I spoke very straight to him I did, Mrs. Beal. I said I didn't hold with making a pantomime of religion, I didn't."

"There now!" exclaimed the large woman, sucking a tooth in contemplative admiration. "Well, I've always said, and I'll say it again, if anyone wants to hear the truth they'll get it from you, Mrs. Waghorn. Look at those two young hooligans now. Anyone 'ud think they'd put their heads up the flue."

"I've half a mind to speak to that long rasher of wind," said Mrs. Waghorn, eyeing Huffam with contemptuous disapproval. "He ought to be ashamed of himself dropping dirty rubbish all over a decent road and expecting pore kids to pick it up for him. I don't wonder people are turning commonist. It's enough to make anybody turn commonist when people calling themselves gentry behave like ignorant tramps."

By now a sizable crowd had collected to watch the two boy-scouts carrying the paraffin-stove to the ladder which the driver had let down from the top of the omnibus, on which he was waiting to receive their burden. Huffam, who intended to reward the boy-scouts with a shilling at the expense of the taxpayer, thought that they were so black by now they might as well finish the job, and it was his encouragement of their efforts which was filling Mrs. Waghorn with a desire to rebuke him. At last she could contain herself no longer.

"Go on, why don't you help 'em, mister?" she shrilled from the kerb. "You got a bath up there to wash yourself in, haven't you?"

Huffam flushed.

"Fancy!" Mrs. Beal observed. "You'll often hear anyone call anyone with red hair carrots, but he *is* a carrot. A walking carrot."

"I wouldn't never trust a red-haired man myself," said Mrs. Waghorn darkly. "Ginger for pluck, they say. Well, I don't like ginger. Nor I never did. It repeats on me something shocking. Welks too, specially if I drink porter with them. Look at that, now! Tut-tut!"

The sight on which she invited Mrs. Beal to gaze was

the triple-burner paraffin-stove which just as it was nearing the top of the omnibus had slipped from the hands of the boy-scouts and returned to the roadway. Huffam sighted a policeman down the road making his way toward the crowd.

"Leave the wretched thing where it is," he told the driver. "We *must* be getting along."

The driver descended from the roof, folded the ladder, and took his place in front. Huffam hurried inside, and as the omnibus drove off flung a shilling to the boy-scouts.

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Waghorn gasped. "Drops a piece of rubbish in the road and goes on as unconcerned as a horse."

"What's all this?" demanded the policeman, elbowing his way through the crowd. "Did you two boys put this in the road?"

The crowd intervened to exonerate the two boys.

"Dropped off a motor-'bus?" the policeman exclaimed. "What was you two boys doing with this on top of a motor-'bus?"

The crowd vociferated fresh explanations as the policeman took out his notebook.

In the station-'bus, which was half a mile away by now from the enquiry that was being held, the driver slowed down and turned to ask Huffam if anybody had taken his number.

"If anybody has, you can refer to the Ministry of Waste," he was reassured.

The relief of ridding himself of that triple-burner paraffin-stove was so great that Huffam considered the possibility of opening the door of the 'bus and dropping out the birdcages one by one, possibly even the coalscuttles as well, without attracting the attention of the driver. However, he decided against this course of action. After all, the birdcages and the coalscuttles presented no problem compared with that of the bath, and that could not be dropped off.

It was nearly half-past seven when the driver announced that they were approaching the outskirts of Hodford and asked where exactly his fare wanted to go.

"I have to make enquiries first," he replied. "You'd better pull up."

Huffam alighted from the 'bus to enquire of a passer-by the whereabouts of Nobbs' Bottom. As usually happens when a motorist wants to enquire the way, all pedestrian traffic, all traffic indeed of any kind, stopped completely as soon as Huffam got out. While the 'bus was making good speed along the broad tarmac road to Hodford there had seemed a steady procession of people on the sidewalk. Now it was as empty as the Great Kalahari Desert. The drizzle had turned to a light rain. Only the borborygmi of the waiting 'bus broke the melancholy silence of the urbanised country. At last a couple approached. They were walking each with an arm encircling the other's back, thus announcing to the world that they were in the condition known as courting. It distressed Huffam to interrupt this moist idyll, but time was pressing. The punctual Pettiwards and Levetts had no doubt already gone up to dress for dinner. There was no sound of other footsteps approaching. The question was not the question he would have chosen to ask a courting couple, but it had to be asked.

"Excuse me," he said, "but could you oblige me by telling me if I am anywhere near Nobbs' Bottom?"

The girl gasped back a scream, and withdrawing her hand from the small of the swain's back, clutched his arm in affright.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," the swain growled, quickening his steps and dragging the girl after him.

Huffam wished that another homing boy-scout would appear. He could think of nothing that would please a boy-scout more than the opportunity to do a good deed by showing him the way to Nobbs' Bottom. It was an absolutely ideal occasion to bring out all that was best

from a boy-scout and help him to display in his earliest 'teens those imperial qualities which we glory in calling British. No boy-scout appeared, and Huffam was on the point of telling the driver to carry on until they came to a wayside inn when another pedestrian approached. The lamps of the 'bus established that he was a small thin man with pince-nez on a long sharp nose.

Huffam repeated the question he had asked of the courting couple.

"Nobbs' Bottom?" the newcomer repeated, tilting up his head toward Huffam's face with what if it had been light enough to see it would certainly have been a piercing glance. "Nobbs' Bottom is the name of a field in this neighbourhood divided into two by the River Hod. One half of it is a rubbish dump."

"That's the place," Huffam eagerly affirmed.

"Nobbs' Bottom," the stranger informed him, "lies about three-quarters of a mile further along on the left-hand side of the road. A gate leads into it just before you reach the bridge over the Hod. You can't mistake it. The road runs downhill for a hundred yards before you reach it."

"I'm much obliged to you," said Huffam, making a move toward the 'bus.

Suddenly the stranger noticed the dim white shape of the bath on top.

"But look here," he offered, "I'll come along with you and show you just where the gate is to Nobbs' Bottom."

"No, no, no, don't bother," said Huffam quickly. This stranger was evidently inquisitive. He did not want any more paragraphs in the Press about the activities of the Ministry of Waste.

"It's no trouble, I assure you," the stranger insisted.

"I couldn't dream of it," said Huffam. "Good-night and many thanks."

He had shut himself inside the 'bus by now and told the driver to go on.

"The place I want is about three-quarters of a mile further along, at the end of a dip in the road."

"Is it a large house, sir?"

"It's not a house. It's a field."

"Oh, a field? That's funny."

"Why?"

"I thought we were going to a house, that's all."

The driver was not the only person who thought it funny for his 'bus to be bound for a field. Mr. Robert Glegg, the sharp-nosed pedestrian of whom Huffam had enquired the whereabouts of Nobbs' Bottom, found it funny that a stranger standing by a station-omnibus should accost him in an educated voice for the purpose of finding the whereabouts of Nobbs' Bottom. What was he anxious to dispose of among the rubbish heaps of Nobbs' Bottom?

Now, Mr. Robert Glegg was an amateur detective. At least, he would have been if any amateur outside the pages of novelists ever were detectives. In practice he had never had any opportunities to display his gifts of detection except in the parlour game called Murders, and even these had been much restricted of late owing to the over-excitability of the game for the ladies of Hodford. At the last game of Murders played at a Hodford party an actress sister of one of the Hodford doctors had shrieked with such realism when the player who had drawn the lot as the murderer was throttling her in the dark that, when the lights went up, besides the actress lying in mock death upon the floor, three of the ladies of Hodford were lying round her in a real faint. Mr. Glegg had of course discovered the murderer, but the game was voted not quite the thing for Hodford, and Hodford society returned to the staid games which Murders had for a time displaced.

So Mr. Robert Glegg nowadays had nothing upon which to exercise his virtuosity in the solution of mysteries except the printed page. Often he would daydream of a genuine murder in Hodford, and of a puzzled-looking

Detective-Inspector of the C.I.D. coming into his cosy den at Ben Nevis, Oaks Road, and flinging himself down into an armchair and muttering wearily that it was the most complicated case he had ever investigated.

"No luck, Inspector, with that boot-button?" he would ask sympathetically as he offered the professional a stiff whisky and soda.

"None at all, Mr. Glegg."

"Shall we go over the clues together, Inspector?"

"I've gone over them a dozen times, Mr. Glegg."

And the despised amateur would go over them again until at last the professional would spring to his feet, his eyes aglow.

"By Jingo, Mr. Glegg, I believe you've hit it."

But of course he would never claim the credit for his deadly deductions. Scotland Yard should have it all. Amateur detectives were the purest amateurs in the world. Long might they remain so!

And now after many a volume of detective romance and many a daydream he was faced by the possibility of a genuine mystery which he might unravel before the police even heard of it, though of course they should have all the credit afterwards as usual. The stranger standing by that station-omnibus had certainly been nervous. Why should he be seeking a rubbish dump? And what had been that large white object on the roof of the 'bus? A bath! That's what it had been, a bath! Could he, Robert Glegg, by one of those strange accidents which occur so often in detective-novels but so seldom outside them, have discovered a second George Joseph Smith? The murder of his brides in baths had certainly been discovered by a strange accident. . . . Mr. Robert Glegg turned round and walked rapidly back along the road toward Nobbs' Bottom. At the top of the dip in the road he stopped. The 'bus was drawn up beside the gate into the wasteground. By the light of the lamps he could see the tall thin stranger apparently engaged in argument with the driver. Dare he

creep near enough to overhear what they were saying? Mr. Glegg crossed to the other side of the road and moved as quietly and quickly as he could along the hedge that bordered it. The tall thin stranger's educated voice was still inaudible, but the driver was less careful.

"Look here, guv'nor," he was saying, "I tell you once more I ain't going to drive my 'bus into that field. I've helped you with the perambulator and the birdcages and the mangle and the coalscuttles and all the rest of the blooming rubbish, but I'm not going to drive my 'bus into that field and perhaps get it stuck in the mud, and I'm not going to crick my back trying to lift that bath off on to the road single-handed. It'll have to go back where it come from. That's all there is to it."

"But I'll help you with the bath," the tall stranger put in.

"I wasn't hired to carry a bath to Hodford. I was hired to take a load of luggage to Victoria. There's something fishy about this job, and I don't want to be mixed up in it."

Mr. Glegg did not wait to hear any more. Throwing caution aside and praying for the sight of one of the local constables on his beat, he sprinted on over the bridge toward Hodford. It was certain that fortune had revealed to him a murderer combining in himself George Joseph Smith, William Deeming, and Mrs. Pearcey.

It was not until Mr. Glegg reached the market-square of Hodford three-quarters of a mile from Nobbs' Bottom that he found P.C. Stubbs making notes about a small car which the owner had left lightless and unattended. Pre-occupied with this grave offence, P.C. Stubbs found it difficult to shift the points of his mind and direct the train of thought from a motor to a murder.

"A murder in Nobbs' Bottom?" he repeated sceptically.

"I don't go as far as that, Constable," Mr. Glegg said. "But I think you should investigate why a station-

omnibus of the Southern Railway should have driven so far north as Hodford to deposit a white enamelled bath at least six feet long, a perambulator, a mangle, some bird-cages, and some coalscuttles, and other domestic articles. You'll admit it is rather odd?"

"People does get rid of old rubbish," the constable pointed out with an obstinate commonsense that Mr. Glegg considered impenetrable stupidity. "There was something about it on the wireless only last night."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Glegg impatiently. "Some of our self-important fellow-citizens were pestering people for scrap iron all this morning. But that's neither here nor there. You don't suggest surely that last night's broadcast has any bearing on a Southern Railway station-omnibus driving all this way to deposit old rubbish. It seems to me obvious that for some reason or other it was desirable to conceal the whereabouts of these domestic articles, and we are at once confronted with a question. Why?"

"Why not?" asked P.C. Stubbs.

Mr. Glegg prayed inwardly for patience. He knew from many a thriller that it was the destiny of every amateur detective to imperil his brains by trying to butt his way through official boneheadedness. He could not recall, however, any example in books of such density of vision as that of P.C. Stubbs.

"Do station-omnibuses of the Southern Railway make a habit of depositing baths in Hodford?" he demanded passionately.

"Not as I'm aware of," the constable admitted. "But that doesn't say it's a case of murder in Nobbs' Bottom."

"I do not say that myself. All I say is that the circumstances are sufficiently extraordinary to justify my calling your attention to the matter. I suppose you've heard of the murder of the brides in the bath?"

"I heard my mother speak of it, but I was only a nipper at the time."

"Have you heard of Mrs. Pearcey?"

"Not as I remember. Who was she?"

"She murdered a woman and her baby and wheeled the remains in a perambulator through Kentish Town."

"Well, this isn't Kentish Town," P.C. Stubbs maintained stolidly.

"That may be so. But the man who hired this omnibus has deposited a perambulator in Nobbs' Bottom."

"That doesn't go to say there's human remains inside, does it, Mr. Glegg?"

"Have you heard of William Deeming?"

"Can't say I have. What did he do?"

"Murdered his wife and family, burnt the remains in a stove, and buried them under the kitchen floor of a house he sold to other people before leaving for Australia."

"Well, when you've been in the Force even so long as I have, Mr. Glegg, you find out people'll do anything, and that's a fact. Did you say a stove, Mr. Glegg?"

"He burnt the remains in a stove, yes."

"That's funny," P.C. Stubbs observed pensively. "Funny, that is. About a quarter of a hour before I went out on my beat and proceeded to investigate the obstruction caused by this Ford car, we had a 'phone message through to the station from the police-station in Tottenden asking us to look out for a motor-'bus which had dropped a stove in Tottenden High Street, thereby causing an obstruction."

"A stove? What kind of a stove?" Mr. Glegg asked eagerly.

"They didn't say what kind of stove."

"It must have been dropped by this mysterious 'bus, anyway."

"It might have been," the constable agreed cautiously.

"It's standing by the gate of Nobbs' Bottom now, you say?"

"It was standing there a quarter of an hour ago. I hurried as quickly as possible to find you."

"Depositing rubbish, you say?"

"Most of it had already been deposited. That's what I want you to investigate. I strongly suspect we shall find human remains."

"*Well?*" the constable exclaimed indignantly. "If it's a matter of investigation it'll be me who does it. The public aren't called upon to investigate. A nice muddle we should all be in if the public started off investigating."

"I take it you'll require me to identify this 'bus and the occupants?" Mr. Glegg asked tartly.

"Identification, yes. But identification and investigation is two very different things," P.C. Stubbs retorted.

"Well, don't you think we'd better hurry back to Nobbs' Bottom?" the amateur detective pressed. "We don't want them to escape us."

As Mr. Glegg spoke these words the station-omnibus itself drove into the market-square of Hodford and pulled up.

"How far am I from the nearest petrol-filling station?" the driver called out.

"That's the bath," Mr. Glegg whispered excitedly. "It's still there, but there's nobody inside the 'bus."

Chapter Seven

AND A MOST DIFFICULT NIGHT

THE argument between Huffam and the driver of the station-'bus had ended in a victory for the latter. Nothing would persuade him either to drive into Nobbs' Bottom or to help his fare drag the bath through the gate and leave it there.

"And what do you want to throw a good bath like that out on a rubbish dump?" he had asked finally. "Anybody could do with a bath like that. I could do with it myself."

"You could do with it?" Huffam had repeated eagerly. "Why didn't you say so before? I'll give you that bath with pleasure."

The eagerness with which Huffam made this offer had reawakened the driver's suspicions for a moment, but he had decided within himself that if when they got back to London he thought better of it he could always refuse the gift. The great thing was to get back to London, and tea.

"Well, we'll have to go into Hodford now and fill up my tank."

"You take the 'bus in," Huffam had told him. "I'll wait for you here." He had suddenly remembered that he had omitted to make a list of the articles deposited in Nobbs' Bottom for filing and future reference.

So the driver had gone off for petrol and left the good Civil Servant to his methodical duty. In several cases the donors had tied labels with their names and addresses which he noted with the help of his lighter: but the triple-burner paraffin-stove so fortunately deposited on the way through in Tottenden, the bath, the perambulator and the mangle were all unacknowledgeable, though

there was a label attached to the last advertising that it was from *A Conscientious Taxpayer*. Huffam wished he knew who had sent that accursed bath. With what pleasure he should have returned it carriage forward. However, the principles of the Civil Service demanded that irrespective of the donors a list of what had been donated should be filed for future reference. The right course would have been to make a list of the articles before they left Eaton Square, check that list with the driver of the 'bus, and check it again when he unloaded at Nobbs' Bottom. He reproached himself now for not having done this. This cracked dustpan, for instance, had that travelled with him this evening, or had it been expelled from the housemaid's closet of some local resident? He decided to enter the dustpan on his list with an interrogation mark in brackets against it.

If in the future any question should arise about a dustpan's having been presented to the Minister of Waste, a suitable reply could be made and the note of interrogation deleted from the records of Wharton House. Hullo, there was a typewriter inside the perambulator. Or was it a sewing-machine? No, it must be a typewriter, though there was not a single letter left upon it to establish the fact beyond argument. And this hideous convolution of rusty metal, what was this? The inside of a portable gramophone perhaps.

So, patiently and methodically, Huffam catalogued the articles deposited by an official of the Ministry of Waste on the dumping-ground in the vicinity of Hodford known as Nobbs' Bottom. He had just entered up the last of the birdcages when he heard the sound of the station-'bus. A moment or two later a voice rang out through the sodden grey moonshine bidding him stop where he was.

Huffam raised himself to his full height and peered across the hillocks of rubbish. The burly form of P.C. Stubbs, accompanied by Mr. Robert Glegg and the driver of the 'bus, approached.

"Were you shouting to me?" the Civil Servant asked in disgusted astonishment.

"I was giving you my orders," the constable replied, with the quiet dignity of the official who knows his position to be impregnable. "I want to look at all this stuff you've been carting here. Is this your perambulator?"

"No, it's not my perambulator," Huffam answered sharply.

The constable switched his bull's-eye on it.

"If it isn't your perambulator, how did you come to bring it here? Perhaps it's not your bath either, and which is now on the top of this motor-omnibus?"

"It is not, strictly speaking, my bath."

"Oh, not strictly speaking?"

P.C. Stubbs produced his notebook.

"Then whose is this bath?"

"I do not know. It was an anonymous gift to . . ." Huffam hesitated and looked at Mr. Robert Glegg. "Does this gentleman occupy an official position?" he asked severely.

"This is Mr. Glegg, the Manager of the Hodford Paper Works," said the constable.

Huffam's mouth closed with a snap. The last person to whom he was prepared to reveal what might fairly be considered an official secret was a manager of paper works.

"Gift to who?" P.C. Stubbs pressed.

"That I decline to say," Huffam replied. "But you can be quite sure, Constable, that in leaving the bath here I have acted strictly in the national interest."

"Wait a moment, wait a moment, not quite so fast. You haven't left this bath here yet. You've left quite enough as it is by what I can see."

P.C. Stubbs turned his bull's-eye on the inside of the perambulator. Mr. Glegg dived forward and pulled from underneath the seat a parcel wrapped in newspaper and tied up with string to which was attached a label.

"This feels like bones," he muttered.

"Bones?" the constable echoed. "Did you say bones?"

"As I thought, bones," the amateur detective proclaimed triumphantly as he spread the contents of the parcel on the seat of the perambulator.

P.C. Stubbs turned his attention to the label, and read out ponderously:

From Rover who barks his hope that every patriotic dog will follow his example. The perambulator is an offering from a grateful mother whose tots are tots no longer but fine young men ready to serve King and Country when the call comes.

The constable looked at the bones again.

"Are you putting it to me that these bones belonged to a dog?" he asked Huffam.

"I'm not putting anything to you," the latter replied fretfully. "But obviously these are bones which might at some time or other have been gnawed by a dog."

"And you still refuse to tell me who this perambulator was sent to?" P.C. Stubbs asked.

"I will answer no questions in front of this gentleman," Huffam said firmly. "If you like, I will accompany you to the police-station and explain the circumstances to the Sergeant or Inspector or Superintendent or whoever is in charge."

"Inspector Milfoy," said P.C. Stubbs, in his tone a hint of doubt about the result of such an explanation. The Inspector could lay off something alarming if his subordinates made mistakes. He decided to compromise.

"I'll not ask you to accompany me to the police-station," he said, "if you'll desist from any attempt to deposit the bath you have on top of the motor-'bus. And though you've no business to come out here leaving rubbish, you not being a ratepayer of Hodford, I'll say no more about that. On'y there's one thing . . ." he flashed his bull's-eye full on Huffam and frowned at him sternly

from the shades behind . . . "we've had a complaint on the 'phone this evening from the Tottenden police that a motor-'bus, number unknown, dropped a stove in Tottenden High Street this evening round about 7.15 p.m. We've notified them of the number now, and you'll do well to stop in Tottenden on your way and explain just how it happened. Mind, I'm warning you for your own good. If you can satisfy the Tottenden police it wasn't done deliberate, I don't say they'll be too hard on you. You heard what I said?" he added, turning to the driver.

"I heard what you said all right, not having cloth ears," the driver muttered surlily.

"But look here, what is the objection to my leaving the bath here?" Huffam asked. He was trying to raise its value in the eyes of the driver.

"You've left quite enough here as it is," P.C. Stubbs ruled. "If you want to argue the point I'll make you put the whole lot back on the 'bus. Now then, before you go I'd like your name and address. Perhaps you have your card with you?"

Huffam did have his card with him, but on that card was inscribed 'Ministry of Waste'. He was not going to give that secret away to the manager of a paper works.

"Mr. Oliver Huffam. H-U-double F-A-M, C.B.E."

"H-U-double F-A-M-C-B-E? Is that a Russian name?" the constable asked suspiciously.

"No, Oliver Huffam, C.B.E."

"I don't quite get this," said the constable. "Where does C-B-E come into H-U-double F-A-M?"

"C.B.E. is Commander of the British Empire."

"C.B.E. *who* is?"

"It's all right, constable," said the amateur detective. "He's trying to tell you he's an O.B.E."

P.C. Stubbs licked his pencil and shook his head.

"What's the address?" he asked.

"9 Chillingham Gardens, S.W. 7. Chillingham has two L's," Huffam added icily.

"If it should be necessary for the Hodford police to communicate with you as to removing this deposit of rubbish you've deposited, you will receive a communication from the Hodford police in due course. If you'd have listened to the wireless last night you'd have heard the Government asking the public to save all their rubbish and hand it over to them."

"I think you may conclude that if there is any valuable waste on the Hodford dumping-ground the District Controller of Waste duly appointed will take that in hand," Huffam assured the constable. "You still object to my depositing the bath here?"

"You can't deposit any bath here."

Huffam turned on his heel and walked back to the 'bus with the driver.

"It's a quarter past eight," he said. "Drive back as quickly as you can to South Kensington. But we have to stop for a moment at Tottenden Police Station."

"A moment!" the driver commented bitterly. "If I get my tea before eleven o'clock to-night I'll say I've been lucky."

When the sound of the 'bus southward bound died away Mr. Glegg asked P.C. Stubbs if he had any objection to his casting an eye over the rest of the rubbish.

"What for?" the constable asked.

"Frankly, I should like to satisfy myself that . . ."

P.C. Stubbs interrupted the amateur detective.

"I satisfied myself, didn't I?"

"Apparently you did."

"Very well, that's all the satisfying that's required. You're not trying to tell me you know better than the police, are you?"

Mr. Glegg was convinced he knew better than the police; but at the same time he recognised the imprudence of falling out with them, and unwillingly he walked back with P.C. Stubbs into Hodford.

Now Mr. Robert Glegg was a bachelor, and it reflects

on the disadvantages of such a state that after vainly trying to get what he called the Case of the Mysterious Bath out of his mind by burying himself in a tale of imaginary crime, he should within half an hour of reaching Ben Nevis suddenly decide to ride to London on his motor-bicycle. Had he been married, a wife would have deterred him from this wild plan to leave the cheerful fire in his den and ride twenty miles through a wet autumn night. There was no wife. There was only Mrs. Pinches, his cook-housekeeper, who presumed when he announced his intention of riding out on a night like this to visit a friend that it must be a lady-friend, and who, not being his wife, merely clicked her tongue and wondered what he would do next.

By nine o'clock Mr. Robert Glegg was riding at forty miles an hour along the London road, adventure seething in his breast. He had no clear idea what he intended to do when he reached Chillingham Gardens, but being an amateur detective, he felt certain that he would be inspired to do the right thing.

Meanwhile, the murderer himself had reached Tottenham.

"I suppose I'd better look in at the police-station and explain about that stove," he said to the driver. "I want to telephone too."

Sergeant Barclay, who was in charge, seemed inclined at first to take a serious view of the offence.

"This stove's causing an obstruction," he affirmed. "Didn't you see it just down the road? I've had to rope it round and put up a red lamp."

"I noticed a red lamp," said Huffam. "I thought the road was up."

"Not at all. That's your stove. How did you come to drive on the way you did?"

"I was in a great hurry, Inspector, and the stove really wasn't worth stopping for. I'm sorry if it has caused any inconvenience . . ."

"It's certainly caused a lot of inconvenience."

"I say I'm extremely sorry. But it never occurred to me that the stove wouldn't be removed by the police."

"The police have something better to do than remove stoves dropped in frequented thoroughfares," Sergeant Barclay observed sternly.

"Some boy-scouts seemed to be dealing with the matter," Huffam pointed out.

"Boy-scouts'll deal with anything if you let 'em. We've had more trouble than enough with boy-scouts round Tottenden. Specially with the Cuckoo Patrol. We had a very good scout-master till he got into trouble, and the new scout-master's so afraid of what people will think he lets the little rascals run wild."

"Well, of course, I didn't know that when I asked those two boy-scouts to deal with the stove."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't . . . well, as you've called in to explain matters, I think I can say the police won't take any further action. I'll send a constable along the road with you and you can pick up your stove."

"But I don't want the stove, Inspector. I'm perfectly willing to leave it in Tottenden."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I really must ask you to remove it."

Huffam saw that it was no use arguing further with the Sergeant. He recognised in him an official who could be as impervious as himself to the pleadings of miserable humanity. He did what he wished everybody would do when confronted with an official *non possumus*. He bowed gracefully before the inevitable.

"Very well, Inspector, if that is your ruling I am bound to accept it."

"Yes, sir," said the Sergeant, obviously touched by the response of a kindred spirit, and possibly moved by the anticipation of his rank. "I knew you'd see the matter from our point of view. If I was a private individual I'd let you leave your stove anywhere and welcome, but rules are rules."

"Quite, quite," Huffam agreed. "I realise that perfectly. I'm only sorry that you've had so much trouble."

"Oh, we won't talk any more about that, sir. Markham!"

"Sergeant?"

"Show this gentleman where the obstruction is. He is removing it."

"Very good, Sergeant."

"I wonder if I might use your telephone, Inspector. Huffam is my name. Here is my card."

"Oh, you're at the Ministry of Waste, are you?" the Sergeant asked. "Your Chief was talking over the wireless last night. My missus is always interested in anything to do with the Ministry of Waste, because her brother is Assistant Janitor there. Sergeant Henry Perkins, V.C."

"Really? Of course he's a very familiar figure to me."

"Shall I get you the number you want?"

"Thank you. Kensington 49932, and will you ask if Mrs. Huffam will speak to Mr. Huffam?"

The Sergeant handed over the receiver.

"This is Olly speaking, dear . . . I am so sorry . . . yes, I've had a very busy evening . . . of course not . . . quite right to begin without me . . . I would have telephoned before if I could . . . the claret's all right, that's good . . . I hope to be back by half past nine . . . tell the Pettiwads and the Levetts how sorry I am . . . with you, soon, I hope . . . Jim knows which is the port I always give him . . . good-bye."

P.C. Markham led the way to where the triple-burner paraffin-stove sat squalid and rickety in the road, its roped enclosure illuminated by a red lamp.

"The best thing is to put it inside with you," the driver advised his fare. "It'll only fall off again if we put it on top. Or some of it will. And we've had enough trouble for one evening."

"It might go inside the bath," Huffam suggested.

"I thought I was going to have the bath," the driver objected.

"By all means you shall have the bath," Huffam assured him eagerly. "But you seemed doubtful about accepting it."

"Well, if anyone's going to have a bath they don't want to fill it up with a mucky stove, do they?"

"Yes, I see your point. But won't the stove mess up the inside of the omnibus?"

"It'll be all right if we keep it away from the seats."

So between them Huffam and the driver put the stove into the omnibus, while P.C. Markham quelled the inquisitiveness of any Tottendenians inclined to loiter on the kerb and gape at the procedure.

The clock in the tower of Tottenden Church showed a quarter to nine as the station-omnibus left the old town behind and sped toward the tawny stain in the sky above London.

"Didn't give us too much trouble in Tottenden, did they?" the driver observed, cocking an ear for his fare's reply.

"No, the police sergeant was most obliging."

"More than that wall-eyed jellyfish was in Hodford," said the driver. "Nosey? Not half. Oh, I told him straight, I did. I said, 'A nose ain't no use to you, a nose ain't. What you want is an elephant's trunk to poke into other people's business.' I don't like Peeping Toms, I don't."

With the prospect of sitting down to his tea soon after half-past nine if the luck of the road was with them, and perhaps thinking of the missus's gratification when he presented her with the bath, the driver was much more cheerful than Huffam had yet seen him.

"Argles is my name," he informed his fare. "I'll put the bath down at our place before I garage the 'bus. Pimlico's where I live. We have the ground floor and basement of a house in Porson Street. Yes, he was a bit

peculiar with me was that bluebottle in Hodford. But we've got a lot to put up with from the police, we drivers have. Mustn't do this, mustn't do that. Mustn't pass here, mustn't turn there. Anyone 'ud think we was committing a nuisance in a public thoroughfare, the way the police mess us about."

The old Home Office official asserted himself in Huffam.

"Oh, I don't think we have much to criticise in our police," he said. "After all, it's their duty to see that rules and regulations are kept."

"There's too many rules and regulations, to my thinking," Argles asserted.

Huffam shook his head in what he intended to be humorous rebuke.

"You'd find it a queer world without rules and regulations."

"Yes, it might be a queer world, but that doesn't say it wouldn't be a pleasanter world all round."

"You're a bit of an anarchist, I see."

"Me an anarchist?" exclaimed Argles indignantly. "Well, I like that. What would I want to go blowing up people for? Live and let live, that's my motto. I don't want to blow up nobody else and I don't want to be blown up myself. That's what I said to that copper in Hodford. I told him straight. 'You didn't ought to have gone into the police,' I told him. 'You ought to have been a clergyman. Yes,' I said, 'you'd have been all right in a pulpit,' I said, 'joring away at a lot of poor geezers who couldn't jore back at you. And if I'm hired to shoot rubbish on to a rubbish dump I'm hired, aren't I, just the same as you're hired to walk round the houses dressed up in blue?" Of course, he was being edged on all the while by that other nosey parker with glass eyes."

"Glass eyes?" Huffam echoed. "Do you mean to say he was blind?"

"Him blind? I don't think. Not with those bossers

he was wearing. But straight, he thought you was Jack the Ripper."

"Jack the Ripper?"

"Yes! Carried on alarming he did about cutting up people and burning of 'em in stoves and drowning of 'em in baths, and I don't know what not. I tell you I begun to feel a bit worried. Trunks, that was what he was crackers on. Wanted to know if you'd left a trunk anywhere along the road. Well, you heard him yourself when he found them bones. Anyone can laugh at it now, but it give me a bit of a turn when I heard him holler out 'Bones!' like that."

"I thought him extremely impertinent," said Huffam.

"So he was. Regular cheeky, you might say. Will I drive you back to Eaton Square?"

"No, no, drive me to . . . or no, drop me at the Marble Arch and I'll take a taxi. You'll want to get home quickly with that bath. I suppose you have a room for it?"

"Well, the missus and me have often said what a treat it 'ud be to have a bath, and there's a room in front of our kitchen which we don't use. We got our sitting-room on the ground floor. And if we put this bath in this empty front-room in the basement which we don't use it'll be nice and handy for the hot water. So when you was going to dump this bath I said to myself 'Well, why not?' And that's how I come to make the suggestion."

"I'm very glad indeed for you to have the bath," said Huffam cordially. "I wish I'd known earlier you wanted a bath. We could have left it in Pimlico on our way."

At the corner of Edgware Road Huffam alighted from the omnibus and settled his account with the driver. In view of the fact that Argles would be the richer by a bath he did not feel justified in charging the taxpayer with more than half a crown in the way of a tip.

"Well, good-night to you, and I hope the bath will please your wife."

"What about the stove, sir? If you'll call a taxi I'll

help the driver get it alongside of him. That'll be the best way to take it."

"You couldn't make any use of the stove yourself?" Huffam asked.

"I'm afraid not, sir. It's really too far gone. Even without that bump it got in Tottenden High Street it wouldn't have been no good."

"It would oblige me very much if you *could* see your way to taking it off my hands."

"I don't like to be disobliging, sir, specially after you letting me have the bath, but my missus would create if I came back home with that stove. It's not so black as what it was when those two boy-scouts started in on it. They rubbed a good bit off on theirselves. But it's too black for my missus."

The taxi-driver eyed the triple-burner paraffin-stove with a cold eye when he was invited to help Argles with it out of the omnibus.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a stove, mate," Argles told him encouragingly.

"A stove, is it? Where's it going in my taxi?"

"Alongside you, mate. I'll help you put it in," Argles volunteered, "and you can get your strap round it."

"Is that bath going too?" the taxi-driver asked, looking up at the roof of the 'bus suspiciously.

"No, no, that's staying where it is."

"Good job," the taxi-driver observed, "because if it had of been going it wouldn't of."

"Better hold it by the paper, mate," Argles advised. "It's a bit black here and there."

"Here and there?" exclaimed the taxi-driver, looking at his hand. "More here than there. I'm driving a taxi, not sweeping chimneys for a living."

However, the stove was got up into the taxi, and with a wonderful feeling of lightness in his heart Huffam saw that infernal bath wobbling away down Park Lane as the taxi entered Hyde Park.

The clock at Hyde Park Corner, which has probably been anxiously gazed at by more diners-out and theatre-goers than any clock in London, told the time was twenty minutes to ten.

"Well, I'll be home before ten anyway," Huffam reflected. Then he thought: "I'll leave that stove outside against the area railings until the Pettiwads and the Levetts have gone. Then we'll wrap it up in an old sheet and carry it out to the back of the house."

Cheered by this solution, Huffam leant back in the taxi and, for the first time that day since Miss Quekett arrived at the Ministry, felt at peace.

"No, no, we'll leave it there for the present," he told the taxi-driver when at last he was back outside 9 Chillingham Gardens.

"I'll give the maid a hand in with it," the driver offered. "My hands are so black now a little more won't make them any blacker."

"No, thank you. I'll leave it here against the railings," Huffam insisted.

He paid the taxi-driver and hurried up the steps to let himself into the house and proclaim his return. As he closed the door behind him a motor-bicycle rounded the corner of Chillingham Gardens and stopped a few doors along from Number Nine. From it dismounted a man with spectacles and a sharp nose. He left his machine and walked back to Number Nine. He bent down and looked at the dark object against the area railings.

"The stove! The stove!" he breathed exultantly to the moist autumnal night.

Chapter Eight

WHICH CONTINUES MOST DIFFICULT

IT was long since Oliver Huffam had derived so much emotional satisfaction from the sight of Gertrude. Her quick ears had heard the taxicab drive up, and as the front door clicked behind him she was half-way down the stairs from the drawing-room, where she and Mona Pettiward and Enid Levett had only just been joined by Jim and Mark.

"Olly dear, I'm afraid you've had a ghastly time," she exclaimed solicitously in that flat English voice to which Melpomene herself could not give a *vibrato*. Gertrude Huffam was now in her early forties, the daughter and granddaughter of Civil Servants. She was so much like so many other Englishwomen, and as a girl had been so much like so many other English girls, that it is rather a strain to particularise her features. She was tall and thin. Her hair was a faded light-brown. Her complexion had the damp pinkness of a sun-thwarted September rose. Her eyes were the wan blue of a fine winter's afternoon in Wolverhampton.

"Yes, I've had a pretty wearing day," Oliver Huffam told his wife.

The sound of their father's voice brought Nigel and Joan from a room at the end of the hall. They were both slightly dishevelled with the homework of their respective forms at St. James's School and St. James's Girls' School. Nigel was a lanky boy of fifteen, likely to attain and perhaps exceed his father's height in due course. Joan was a lanky girl of thirteen. Both children had vivid red hair and pale multitudinously freckled faces.

"Hullo, Nigel. Hullo, Joan. Homework done?" their father asked.

"Just finished," Nigel told him.

It was a satisfaction for Huffam to be able to feel perfectly secure that such a reply meant both his children had fulfilled conscientiously the tasks set them.

"That's good. You can come and sit with me while I get a little to eat."

"Olly, you must be absolutely famished," said his wife. "I rang to warn Mabel."

"You'd better go back to our guests, dear. Joan will look after me. I shan't be long."

While Huffam was eating his dinner he questioned Nigel about his progress at school.

"Don't let go of the Greek and Latin, old man. I count on that scholarship at Balliol or Corpus. I didn't pull off the Treasury myself, but it would be grand if you did."

Nigel nodded earnestly. He did so want to pull off the Treasury.

"I'm hoping to get into the Home Office," said Joan.

"Somerville first. *And* a scholarship," her father reminded her.

"I know, Daddy. I'm going to do my best. Hullo, you've finished your chicken. I'll go and get you some trifle. It's jolly good. Nigel and I had some during our breather for the nine o'clock news."

"Was there any news?" Huffam asked his son.

Nigel shook his head.

"The Prime Minister says the policy of the Government is one which will bring us up, up and up, and on, on, and on."

"He's a very sound man is our Prime Minister," Huffam observed with satisfaction.

"Oh yes, and there was an accident at some colliery. Nineteen lives lost."

"Well, we do our best in the Civil Service to avert such disasters, but we have to contend with a great deal

of misguided and ill-informed criticism. However, excelsior!"

"I think by the time I join the Civil Service a lot will have been done to regulate individual enterprise, don't you, Father?"

"Oh, we're moving in the right direction, there's no doubt of that," Huffam agreed.

"We had a debate on 'Individualism and Socialism' in the Junior Debating Society. The Socialists won by a big majority. If the Socialists ever get real power, that'll mean a big addition to the Civil Service, won't it, Father?"

"I should say a very big addition. Ah, here's the trifle. I mustn't be *too* greedy."

Nigel and Joan laughed dutifully.

A few minutes later Huffam had joined his guests.

"Well, you're a nice fellow," Mark Levett exclaimed. "What have you been doing?"

"We had a very tough day at the Ministry. This drive to salvage waste material is giving us a lot of extra work. Everything has to be so carefully considered and borne in mind."

"You've just put a lot of extra work on us," said Mark Levett. "Apparently our two Chiefs lunched together to-day and the question of waste rubber was brought up. The Permanent Secretary isn't too pleased with Sir John Bunting for more or less promising our comments on your proposals within a week."

"A week!" Jim Pettiward gasped. "Did you say a week? You know, these politicians have absolutely no conception of time. We have the same bother at the Home Office."

"I gather there won't be any real difficulty about this rubber business," said Huffam. "What it boils down to is that you people at the Ministry of Production want to produce as much rubber as you can and let us find new uses for it when it's no use for what you want it for."

"Oh, really," Mona Pettiward protested. "Must you

all talk shop? What we want to know is what you were doing at Tottenden, Oliver?"

Huffam looked a little startled. He had not realised that the provenance of the telephone call was known. Then he remembered that Sergeant Barclay had mentioned he was speaking from Tottenden. Still, it had been a little indiscreet of Gertrude to tell the others. No doubt she had been fussed by his failure to arrive in time for dinner. Still . . .

"I'm afraid if I told you that, Mona, it would only involve more shop. I was going into various arrangements the Ministry has been making for this drive against waste."

"Oh dear, how dull! I hoped we were going to catch you out in some marvellous escapade. Wouldn't it be fun, Gertrude, to catch Oliver out in a marvellous escapade?"

"Yes, wouldn't it?" Gertrude agreed, but with the politeness of a hostess rather than the enthusiasm of a wife.

"Let me see, Tottenden?" said Jim Pettiward. "You pass that on the way to Hodford, don't you?"

"I believe you do," Huffam assented. "Why? Are you interested in Hodford, Jim?"

"A great-aunt of mine lives there, and Mona and I are always promising to go down and see the old lady."

"Well, what about Bell and Hammer?" Mark Levett asked impatiently. "The evening's getting on."

The old-fashioned game of Teutonic origin called Bell and Hammer had been a favourite of Mark Levett's in his youth. He had introduced it to Oliver Huffam and Jim Pettiward, and it was the custom when the Huffams, the Pettiwards and the Levetts dined together to indulge in a little gamble—a very little gamble at ten chips a penny—at Bell and Hammer. Nobody else they knew played Bell and Hammer. They began to be proud of being the only people who still played this old-fashioned Teutonic game. They were sorry for people who did not know the delights

of Bell and Hammer, but nothing would have induced any of them to initiate other people to the delights of Bell and Hammer. To do so would have spoilt the intimacy they shared. Bell and Hammer imparted to their dinner-parties a comfortable sense of exclusiveness.

If it were possible to play Bell and Hammer with ordinary dice and cards it would be a labour of love to explain how the game is played; but as it is played with special dice, and with five cards representing a bell, a hammer, a bell and hammer, a white horse and a house, and as the equipment is not easily procurable nowadays, it would be love's labour lost to give an exposition. All that matters to this tale is that at a quarter past eleven, just as Oliver Huffam, holding the bell card, was being paid for a rich throw with the dice, the telephone bell rang.

"I'll see who it is, dear," Gertrude Huffam offered, jumping up.

She came back in a moment.

"It's Mr. Howe," she announced.

The Principal Private Secretary apologised to the players and hurried from the table.

"Huffam speaking, sir . . . but I took the bath away at six o'clock . . . it's come back? . . . you don't think it's another bath? . . . no, of course not . . . oh, well, if Dawkins says it's the same bath certainly he would know . . . who brought it back? . . . oh, it was just left outside on the pavement? Yes, I realise it must have given you a very sharp shock indeed, sir, when you got back from the House and found it waiting for you . . . practically all the rest of the waste material was disposed of twenty miles away from London. I saw to it personally . . . but I still have one item . . . as a matter of fact it's waiting outside my front-door at this moment until some people who are dining with us have left, and then I shall dispose of that . . . no, I had to dispose of the bath to somebody in Pimlico . . . oh, there's a communication inside the bath? . . . painted on the inside? . . . I didn't quite catch

that, sir, I'm afraid . . . who wants a bloody bath with a hole in it? . . . I quite agree, most objectionable . . . unfortunately I only know the street . . . Porson Street, Pimlico . . . if I might suggest it, sir, I don't think that would really be a satisfactory solution . . . the difficulty is with the police on these occasions . . . I had some difficulty this evening . . . yes, no doubt if I had mentioned the Ministry it would have been all right, but I wanted to avoid any possibility of a leakage to the Press like this morning's unfortunate business at the British Museum . . . thank you, sir, I'm glad you approve of my caution . . . Dawkins believes the bath was brought back in a barrow? . . . that is certainly a very plausible theory, but the question is whether I could procure a barrow at this time of night . . . yes, I suppose one might get hold of a lorry . . . but where could one take the bath now? . . . yes, I suppose that *could* be managed, sir . . . no, I fully appreciate that . . . yes, I do see Lady Lavinia's point of view . . . oh, it's most intelligible . . . well, if you'll leave it to me, sir, I'll do my best. . . ."

Huffam picked up the telephone directory and turned to 'Lorries'. Nobody advertised them. He tried 'Carriers'. Another blank. He tried everything he could think of, and then just as he was preparing to lay down Part II L to Z in despair he caught sight of an advertisement that sent a glow through his whole being:

Don't HAVE DELIVERY TROUBLES!!

Hire a Motor Van

For ONE HOUR or 100 YEARS

By DAY or BY NIGHT

HOLDALL TRANSPORT CO.

LONDON'S BEST AND CHEAPEST

805 Euston Road N.W.1.

Museum 76451

He rang up the number indicated.

"Is that Holdall Transport? I am speaking from 9

Chillingham Gardens, S.W. . . . yes, about five minutes' walk from Gloucester Road . . . have you a motor-van free to make a journey of about twenty miles to deliver a bath? . . . at midnight? . . . that will do very well . . . listen . . . it is to drive first to 189 Eaton Square . . . that's right . . . where it will find a bath standing on the pavement outside . . . bath, not calf . . . B for bustard, A for antimacassar, T for tittle-tattle, H for hobble-dehoy . . . have you got that? . . . this bath is to be collected and brought to 9 Chillingham Gardens . . . Mr. Oliver Huffam . . . that's right . . . I will then give the driver further directions . . . no, he is not to ring at the house in Eaton Square . . . the people do not want to be disturbed . . . the bath was put ready for a lorry to call for it, but it has not arrived . . . it is a largish bath . . . the driver would require a man to help him . . . I will settle the account when the van comes to Chillingham Gardens . . . when will that be? . . . before one o'clock . . . that will do nicely . . . I will be expecting him . . . there will be a small item here to add to the bath . . . thank you very much . . . good-bye."

Huffam rang his Chief.

"I have made the appropriate arrangements, sir . . . a motor-van will be calling for the bath about half-past twelve . . . I have told them not to disturb you . . . they will just take the bath away to a suitable place and I don't think you'll hear any more about it . . . I beg your pardon, sir? . . . oh, that's very kind of you indeed, sir . . . yes, as you say, it would be a most appropriate decoration in the circumstances . . . we've always had a little joke at the Ministry about Sir Claud's K.C.B. . . . and my C.B. will make another when the tale can be told . . . yes, as you say, sir, broadcasting is a wonderful thing . . . good-night, sir."

"Your Chief seems a very fidgety fellow," Levett observed when Huffam was again seated at the Bell and Hammer table.

"It's this crusade against waste," the host murmured. "He has thrown himself into it, heart and soul."

"Still, I don't think a Minister of the Crown should take it for granted that permanent officials exist for their convenience," Levett maintained.

"Oh, he's not at all inconsiderate as a rule," Huffam insisted loyally.

"I agree with Mark," Pettiward put in. "It comes from this mistaken notion of contemporary politicians that they have to impress the electorate by appearing to do something. Your Chief was broadcasting last night, wasn't he, Oliver?"

"Yes, I think that may be a mistake."

"A mistake?" Pettiward exclaimed, "I should think it was a mistake. A Minister of the Crown cheapens himself by holding forth as it were in everybody's parlour."

"Come on, Jim, it's your throw," Levett reminded him, "we mustn't let the zealous Ministers of His Majesty's Government spoil our Bell and Hammer."

So for another half-hour the Huffams, the Pettiwards, and the Levetts flung themselves with abandon into their cherished game, after which the men drank whiskies and sodas while Mona Pettiward and Enid Levett were escorted by Gertrude Huffam to put on their wraps.

"I'm afraid it has been rather a disturbed evening," said Huffam as he sped his parting guests from the top of the front-door steps.

"You'll have to train your Chief to be a little less energetic," Levett told him.

"Hullo, what's this?" exclaimed Pettiward. He was bending over to examine the triple-burner paraffin-stove by the area railings.

"I don't know at all," Huffam murmured, his gaze averted.

"It's a stove," Pettiward declared. "An old stove."

"Is it?" Huffam asked indifferently.

"It doesn't seem to impress friend Oliver as anything

unusual to find a stove on the pavement outside his house," Levett laughed.

"It's an extremely dirty old stove," Enid Levett commented distastefully.

"What's the matter?" Gertrude called from the lighted doorway. "Is it a stray dog?"

"It's a paraffin-stove," Mona Pettiward told her.

"A paraffin-stove? You didn't order a paraffin-stove, Olly, did you?"

"No, no, Gertrude, of course not. It's just a stove that somebody has left outside our house," he told her, with a touch of fretfulness.

"You'll have to get your people at the Ministry of Waste busy," Levett said. "This sort of thing outside the house of the Minister's Principal Private Secretary doesn't look too good."

Huffam laughed without mirth.

"Oh, that reminds me," Pettiward put in, "we never heard the story of that ridiculous scene in the British Museum this morning. What were the facts, Oliver?"

"Oh, it was nothing at all. Just a Press stunt."

"Well, good-night, Gertrude. Good-night, Oliver. Such a jolly evening."

"Good-night, Mona. Good-night, Enid. Good-night, Jim. Good-night, Mark. Loved having you."

It was with relief that Huffam saw his guests setting out on the short walk to Gloucester Road Station. As he closed the front door behind him his wife asked what was going to be done about that stove.

"I'm having it sent away in about an hour's time," he told her.

"Then it is your stove?" she asked in amazement.

"No, it's not mine. It was sent by mistake to the Minister, and I am sending it back to-night. A motor-van is calling for it at one. But don't mention it to anybody. We've had a lot of trouble at the Ministry to-day and the Press are looking for scandal."

"Scandal?" Gertrude repeated.

"Oh, nothing unpleasant, my dear, but the Press always like to get hold of something with which they can bait a Government Office."

Gertrude Huffam felt slightly bewildered as she walked upstairs. It was not like Olly to brush aside her questions so abruptly, and it was still less like him to suggest that she was incapable of keeping an official secret. Her ability to keep official secrets had been the corner-stone of their married life. His manner, indeed, now she came to think of it, had been strange all the evening. It had been something more than his natural displeasure at being so late for dinner. She hoped, oh dear, how earnestly she hoped, that there was nothing serious the matter.

"You'd better get off to bed, dear," Oliver was advising her. Could he be anxious to be rid of her? Oh, but that was ridiculous. He had never once in their happy life together shown the slightest sign of that.

"But if you have to sit up till one, Olly, wouldn't you like me to sit up with you?"

"No, no, Gertrude, better not upset your regular hours," Huffam said firmly. "This has been a disorganised evening. Don't let's disorganise it any more than is absolutely necessary. I shall go down to the study and have a look at Nigel's Greek iambics and Joan's French syntax."

Gertrude Huffam could not help feeling hurt, but she showed no sign in her countenance of the wound her husband had inflicted. She went bravely up to the room they had shared since she inherited 9 Chillingham Gardens on the death of her father ten years ago. Perhaps she brushed her faded light-brown hair a little more vigorously than usual, but that was all the expression she allowed to her pent-up emotion.

Downstairs in the study Huffam suffered the shock of detecting a final cretic in Nigel's versification of some lines from Shakespeare. He must warn him of this at

breakfast-to-morrow. He would have time to change the line before leaving for school. However, in spite of that final critic the verses showed promise as a whole. Huffam saw no reason to be despondent about Nigel's prospects of winning even a Balliol scholarship three years hence. He turned to Joan's syntax, and was gratified by the neatness and accuracy with which she had done her homework. In the satisfaction his children afforded him Huffam allowed himself to doze gently while awaiting the arrival of the motor-van from the Holdall Transport Company.

It was ten minutes to one when he heard a knock on the front door.

"Ah, you're earlier than I expected," he said to the driver. "Hullo, you've taken the bath out!"

"Yes, sir, don't you want it taken out?"

"No, no, I want you to convey the bath and this stove to Hodford."

"Yes, sir. What address in Hodford?"

"I want you to convey them to the Hodford Paper Works."

"But will there be anybody to take delivery at this time of night?" the driver asked doubtfully.

"It doesn't matter. Just leave the bath and the stove outside."

"Yes, sir," said the driver, hesitation deepening. It was not the kind of delivery to which he was accustomed.

"Perhaps you don't know where the Hodford Paper Works are?" Huffam asked.

"Oh yes, sir. In fact I know Mr. Glegg the Manager. Ben Nevis, Oaks Road, he lives. We've done one or two little transport jobs for him."

"In that case perhaps you'll leave the bath and the stove outside Ben Nevis. I will pay the charges now. So there will be no need to disturb Mr. Greig."

"Glegg is the name, sir."

"I said Glegg."

"I suppose Mr. Glegg will be expecting this bath and stove?" the driver asked.

"Yes, he wants them as soon as possible, but of course there's no use in waking him up to-night."

"I see, sir. You know that the bath has a big hole in the bottom of it? And I think somebody's been having a game with it outside of 189 Eaton Square where we collected it."

The driver pointed out the inscription which Argles in his disappointment and no doubt stung by the mockery of Mrs. Argles had painted on one side:

'Who wants a bloody bath with a hole in it?'

"I'm afraid Mr. Glegg will have to get that washed off," Huffam said, with a bitter smile.

"Very good, sir. Well, then, we'll load the van again. Bill!"

The driver's companion came forward and together they pushed the bath up into the van. Then they took the stove and packed it away beside the bath.

"Ah, it's your stove, is it, sir?" the policeman on his beat paused to ask. "I was very nearly ringing you up the last time I came round to ask if you knew there was a stove outside your area gate."

"It was waiting for the van, constable."

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, constable."

Huffam paid the account of the Holdall Transport Company and tipped the driver five shillings, making a note of the amounts disbursed in order to obtain a refund from the Finance Department of the Ministry of Waste at the taxpayer's expense. Compared with the £73,000 for Travelling Expenses, the £19,000 for Incidental Expenses, and the £11,000 for Telegrams and Telephones which through its parliamentary representatives an appreciative country had voted to the Ministry of Waste in the last financial year, the expenditure of Huffam to-day

was an insignificant trifle. The taxpayer must not let his temper get the better of him.

"Now let me see I have your instructions correct, sir. I leave the bath and the stove at Mr. Glegg's house in Hodford without him signing for delivery? I mean to say I wouldn't like anything to happen to this load of stuff and then get the blame from the consignee."

"I will take full responsibility," said Huffam. "Just deposit the bath and the stove in the road outside Mr. Glegg's house, though if he has a front garden it might be as well to put them inside the gate. Now, is that all perfectly clear?"

"That's quite clear, sir. Nothing more?"

"Nothing more. Good-night."

Huffam stood in the doorway of his house to watch with what was as near to a feeling of voluptuousness as he had ever achieved the motor-van turn the corner of Chillingham Gardens. As it vanished he saw and heard and smelt with some surprise a motor-bicycle pass his door and a moment later take the corner in the same direction as the van. He closed the front door behind him, put the chain up, and shot the upper and the lower bolt. Then he chuckled to himself at the thought that after all both the bath and the stove were likely to join the birdcages and the perambulator and the mangle among the squalid undulations of Nobbs' Bottom.

"My dear, what is the matter?" Huffam ejaculated when he found his wife sitting up in bed in a pink shawl, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Olly, what is it?" she moaned. "What does it all mean?"

"What does what all mean?"

The counterquestion was answered by a burst of sobs.

"My dear, please calm yourself," Huffam adjured. He had never seen Gertrude cry before, but the man almost completely concealed by the correct exterior of the official asserted himself, and bending over in a rapid parabola he

pecked at her forehead. A moment later, embarrassed by his own demonstrativeness, he stood up tall and thin and pale, his red hair seeming all the redder above his wife's pink shawl.

"Where are you sending that bath, Olly?" Gertrude wailed. "I didn't mean to spy, but I heard the van drive up and saw two men lifting out a bath, and then they lifted it back again and took the stove and drove off. Where are they going, Olly?"

"Gertrude, this is a Ministry matter."

"Oh, please don't make it worse by fobbing me off with unconvincing falsehoods," she begged. "If you are . . . if you are . . . if you are keeping a woman somewhere, I'd rather know the truth."

"Keeping a woman somewhere?" Huffam gasped. "My dear Gertrude, please do not allow your imagination to run riot. This bath was being sent from the Minister's house. The men took it out here by mistake. It is waste material contributed by the public in response to the Minister's national appeal over the wireless. You heard what he said. We listened together. The waste material had to be returned to the donors because it anticipated the pamphlet we are issuing in which full directions will be given about collecting waste for our great crusade."

"If I could only believe you," Gertrude moaned.

"What point is there in inventing such a story?" he asked.

"None, Olly, unless you really are furnishing a house for another woman."

"Well, I don't wish to appear unsympathetic, but I must try to get my sleep," said Huffam. "It's too late to try to convince you to-night. You are evidently in an overwrought state."

"It's such an improbable story," Gertrude insisted.

"Improbable or not," Huffam snapped, "it's true. But I must decline to discuss the matter until you are yourself again. I know you were upset by my not getting back in

time for our dinner-party, but I too have had an extremely wearing day. Now don't let us talk any more. We do not want to say things to one another that we shall both regret."

"Father! Father!"

"What did you say?"

"I was thinking what poor Father would have said if he'd seen that bath and stove going away from his house."

"You're getting hysterical, Gertrude."

"Don't be so brutal, Olly."

"I shall not say another word," he affirmed. "You will be more sensible in the morning, and I shall be less tired."

Chapter Nine

AMATEUR DETECTION

“CONVENIENT,” Mr. Glegg muttered to himself when the motor-van of the Holdall Transport Company went northward. “If I’m going to have a chase I may as well be chasing more or less in the direction of home.”

But he did not realise the full extent of the convenience until to his amazement the motor-van turned into Oaks Road, Hodford, and pulled up in front of his own Ben Nevis.

“Well, I’m jiggered,” he exclaimed. It was a situation he had never come across in detective fiction. Here were the bath and the stove to find out the destination of which he had been feverishly riding through the night being unloaded at his own front gate. “Hi!” he shouted to the driver of the van. “Where are you taking that bath?”

“Mr. Glegg’s house . . . why, good lumme, it’s Mr. Glegg himself. We have a stove for you as well, sir. A Mr. Huffam of 9 Chillingham Gardens, S.W., consigned them to you, but there’s nothing to pay. As you’re up, we can put the bath and stove inside for you. But our orders were to leave them outside and not wake you.”

“I refuse to accept delivery,” said Mr. Glegg excitedly. “This is a trap.”

“No, sir, it’s a paraffin-stove.”

“Take it back where it came from, and charge the carriage to the man who hired you. Take back the bath too.”

“Well, of course if you won’t accept delivery, Mr. Glegg, I can’t compel you to.”

“You certainly can’t. I see the game, but I exonerate you. Only I warn you . . . why, it’s you, Caffyn. I was so angry for a moment I didn’t recognise you.”

“Yes, sir, it’s me,” the driver grinned.

"Just the kind of coincidence that slips the noose round a murderer's neck," the amateur detective murmured to himself.

"I beg pardon, sir?" Caffyn asked.

"Look here, Caffyn. You've done a good deal of work for me, and I wouldn't like to see you get into trouble with the police."

"Oh lor, sir, I don't want that to happen."

"Precisely. Well, if you take my advice you'll put that bath back where you got it from. *And* that stove. Mind you, I'm not giving you any orders. I'm merely giving you advice."

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Glegg," the driver said. "I'll take your advice."

"Where did you pick up the bath?"

"189 Eaton Square. It was on the pavement outside."

"Ah, placed there surreptitiously, of course," the amateur detective commented. "Well, you'd better put it back on the pavement outside."

"I certainly will, sir. And this stove too."

"That was outside the house in Chillingham Gardens."

"That's right, Mr. Glegg, but how did you know?"

"Ah, I know a lot of things, Caffyn, and I think I shall know a lot more soon. Well, you'd better be getting back to London."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure I'm very sorry we troubled you with this bath and this stove."

"On the contrary, you saved me a great deal of trouble."

Mr. Glegg turned in through the gate of Ben Nevis, and the motor-van went southward again.

When Mr. Glegg went into his house he felt too much excited to go to bed. He lit the gas-fire in his den, the bookshelves of which were crowded with detective fiction and many popular crime compendiums. There were even quite a few of the *Notable Trials* which during a decade had been such a tonic for novelists whose powers of invention were suffering from debility. He donned

the kind of dressing-gown Sherlock Holmes made fashionable for amateur detectives, filled his meerschaum pipe, the bowl of which was carved to represent a skull, and sat back in a worn leather armchair brooding upon the problem fate had presented for his solution. Presently he rose and took down from a shelf the case of George Joseph Smith. Apart from the fact that he had murdered these brides in baths there was nothing in George Joseph Smith's behaviour which afforded any clue to the behaviour of Oliver Huffam. He looked up William Deeming, and decided that the stove he had used must have been much more substantial than that triple-burner paraffin-stove he had examined outside Huffam's house. Probably both the bath and the stove were false trails—the kind of false trails that the writers of detective fiction set for their readers in the first half-dozen chapters. But the perambulator?

Mr. Glegg refreshed his memory about the procedure adopted by Mrs. Pearcey. She had wheeled a bassinette perambulator with the dead body of Phoebe Hogg and her child from Kentish Town to Hampstead, dropped Phoebe Hogg on one rubbish dump, the child on another, and finally left the perambulator outside a house in Maida Vale. It might be too much to say that Huffam's procedure was modelled on Mrs. Pearcey's, but that leaving of a perambulator on a rubbish dump twenty miles away from his own house was significant.

Mr. Glegg sprang to his feet, and in the exultation of a sudden resolve knocked his meerschaum skull too hard against the side of the fireplace. It cracked, and his exasperation at the accident made him more grimly determined than ever to bring the murderer to justice. He doffed his dressing-gown, resumed his coat, added a greatcoat and sallied forth into the darkness of the misty autumn night from which the moon had by now departed. He had made up his mind to walk out to Nobbs' Bottom and bring that perambulator to Ben Nevis that he might examine it properly for clues.

In the enthusiasm of amateur detection it had never occurred to Mr. Glegg until he was wheeling the perambulator into Hodford that anybody meeting him thus occupied at half-past three of a dark wet morning might pardonably wonder what on earth he was playing at. Then the thought did strike him, and feeling slightly self-conscious he hoped he would manage to get back to Ben Nevis unobserved, particularly by any of the Hodford police on whose complacency he was hoping to spring a surprise. Fortune was with him. He reached Ben Nevis without meeting a soul, and brought the perambulator safely to his den where, in spite of the hour, he made a careful examination of it with one of those powerful magnifying glasses that serve amateur detectives so well. He could find nothing that resembled a spot of blood or a tuft of clotted hair or indeed any of the recognised marks by which the amateur detective deduces foul play. The parcel of bones which he had discovered under one of the seats afforded no clue either, and the earthy fragments adhering to some of them were probably due to the idiotic habit dogs have of burying bones in herbaceous borders. He re-read the label:

From Rover who barks his hope that every patriotic dog will follow his example. The perambulator is an offering from a grateful mother whose tots are tots no longer but fine young men ready to serve King and Country when the call comes.

Mr. Glegg tried to believe this label offered a vital clue because he wanted to despise the want of imagination which had allowed P.C. Stubbs to leave it to rot on Nobbs' Bottom, but in the end he had to give it up.

"I suppose I've been following a false trail," he said to himself. That the amateur detectives of fiction often spent two-thirds of a book rushing about after false trails did not console Mr. Glegg. After all, there was never any doubt in detective fiction that a murder had been com-

mitted. In fact, in case readers had any doubts in the matter they usually told them so on the outside of the cover. *Death in A Great Western Lavatory* or *Death at the Fourteenth Hole*. You knew from such a title that somebody had not just died of heart failure or apoplexy. He had been murdered, and you hoped to find out by whom round about page three hundred. *Death in the Perambulator*. A very good title. Much better than *Death in the Bath*, which, in spite of the brides, suggested heart failure, or *Death in the Stove*, which merely suggested suicide. But had death been connected in any way with this perambulator? There was absolutely no evidence of it. The label could be explained by the perambulator's being a contribution to a jumble sale at some church bazaar. Had Huffam been bullied into buying it by half a dozen churchy females? Was weakness at a church bazaar the solution of the puzzle?

But Mr. Glegg felt bound on consideration to reject this solution. What man could be quite so weak, even if separated from his wife in the mad throng of a church bazaar, as to buy that loathsome stove? No, it might not turn out to be murder, but a deeper mystery lay at the bottom of this affair than any church bazaar could explain.

"I'll sleep on it," the amateur detective proclaimed to his den. It was a quarter past four in the morning, and therefore about time.

To say that Mrs. Pinches the cook-housekeeper was astonished when, after waking Mr. Glegg at eight o'clock with some difficulty, she went downstairs to dust the den and was greeted by a perambulator is too mild a description of her condition. She was, in her own words to Gladys, her sixteen-year-old assistant, knocked all of a heap.

"A prambulator, Mrs. Pinches?" Gladys exclaimed. "Whoever could have put a prambulator in Mr. Glegg's den?"

"Ask me another, girl. He went out on his motor-bike about half-past eight to see a friend, but however did

he manage to bring a prambulator back with him on his motor-bike?"

"He must have towed it, Mrs. Pinches," Gladys suggested.

"Well, all I've got to say is he ought to know better than go behaving as if he was in a circus. What would the Hodford people think of him towing prambulators round the place behind a motor-bike? It's hardly creditable a sensible man would do such a thing."

"Is it in there now, Mrs. Pinches?"

"Of course it's in there now, you silly girl. You don't think a prambulator's going to walk in and out of a house like a dog?"

"Can I take a peep at it, Mrs. Pinches?"

"God bless the girl, haven't you ever seen a prambulator before?"

"Not in Mr. Glegg's den I haven't, Mrs. Pinches."

"Well, go and look at it if you must," said the housekeeper, who was a large woman with a complexion like raspberry fool.

"Oo-er, it is a prambulator, Mrs. Pinches!" Gladys nodded when she came round-eyed to the kitchen.

"Of course it's a prambulator. Do you think I've lived to have two married daughters of my own and not reckonise a prambulator when I see one?"

"Did you want those bones in the kitchen, Mrs. Pinches?"

"Bones? What bones?"

"The parcel of bones in Mr. Glegg's den."

Mrs. Pinches went off to investigate.

"Well, I never," she declared when she came back. "If Mr. Glegg thinks I can make soup of bones like that he's mistaken. Pop upstairs, Gladys, and give a bang on his door. I saw in his eyes when I took him in his tea he didn't intend to wake up. I'm not surprised neither if he was gallivanting around all night with a pram at the end of his motor-bike."

When Gladys was gone Mrs. Pinches looked attentively at the label which had been tied to the parcel of bones.

"Well, I never," she murmured to herself. "Well, it's a fact you don't know a man till he's dead. Tut-tut-tut! Fancy him having a couple of sons all this while. Grateful too she is, the saucy thing. He must have made her a good allowance regular all these years. That's in his favour anyway."

Gladys came back with news that she'd heard Mr. Glegg get out of bed.

"You didn't go into his room?"

"No, Mrs. Pinches."

"Well, you be careful, Gladys, and never don't go into his room. I wouldn't like him to start being familiar with you."

Gladys blushed.

"Oh, Mr. Glegg wouldn't do that, Mrs. Pinches."

"I'd have said so yesterday. I'm not so sure this morning. Anyway, I've warned you, and you take it to heart. I've known your mother since she and me were girls together, and I wouldn't like her to think I didn't look after you."

When the master of the house came down to his breakfast, Mrs. Pinches went into the dining-room and shut the door carefully behind her.

"I found this in your den this morning," she said, putting the label down on top of the unopened daily paper. "Luckily Gladys never saw it. So it didn't put any ideas in her head. But if you'll take my advice you'll send that prambulator back to the mother. You know me, Mr. Glegg, and you know I always speak out my mind. You can't afford in your position to go bringing back prambulators like that. You know the way the Hodford people talk."

"Oh, the perambulator?" the amateur detective chuckled. "Don't worry about that, Mrs. Pinches. I'm sending that to London. I've finished with it."

"Well, Mr. Glegg, I've been with you now five years, and you've surprised me. Yes, I may have said to myself once or twice, laughing like, that you'd been out with the ladies, and in fact I don't mind admitting I thought when you went off so sudden last night on your motor-bike that you was going to visit a lady friend. But when I came down to dust your den this morning it knocked me all of a heap when I saw that pram. That I never *did* think."

"Which just goes to show how easily anybody may be misled by the obvious clue, Mrs. Pinches. I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you I found that perambulator in Nobbs' Bottom?"

"And the bones too, I suppose?"

"And the bones too."

"Well, I've never pried into your affairs, Mr. Glegg, and I'm not going to start prying now. Only, I hope for your own sake you'll get this prambulator out of the house as soon as possible, though what the Hodford gossips are going to say when they hear of a prambulator being seen coming out of your house I don't know. Still, there it is. They'll hear nothing from me, that's one sure thing. And I'll see as Gladys doesn't talk."

"If you only knew how far you were from the truth," the amateur detective chuckled.

"That's as may be. But what I can see with my two eyes I can see. Now don't think I'm grudging you. I was never the woman to grudge anybody. It's only of your good name in Hodford I'm thinking."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Pinches. I'll telephone the carriers when I get down to the Works. The perambulator will go off to London to-day. Get me a label, will you."

The label was addressed to:

*Mr. Oliver Huffam,
9 Chillingham Gardens,
S.W.7.*

It may be gathered from Mr. Glegg's decision to send the perambulator to Huffam that, brief as had been his night's repose, it had been enough to clear his mind of the belief that the tall, thin, pale, red-headed man who had brought that queer cargo to Nobbs' Bottom was a murderer. The despatch of the perambulator was in a way his own admission that he no longer suspected Huffam of murder. It was at the same time intended to be a warning that because he had acquitted him of murder he was not to consider himself free to travel round the Home Counties depositing rubbish wherever he thought he would. Finally, it was in the nature of the hot return that the tennis-player makes to a boundary-line stroke of his opponent. Huffam had sent him the bath and the stove. He now sent Huffam the perambulator.

The disadvantage of not having a wife has been noted in the case of Mr. Glegg. So far as the perambulator was concerned we should now note the advantage. That Mrs. Pinches should fancy the perambulator was the keepsake of an irregular union in his flaming youth left her employer unperturbed. To him it was merely laughable that she should entertain such a theory. Nor was he disconcerted by the prospect of his morals becoming a topic at Hodford tea-parties. None knew better than he that for the several spinsters of the small town it would lend an added attraction to his company. He had delighted in the reputation of a frustrated Sherlock Holmes: such a reputation would not be impaired if decorated with the potentiality of a Don Juan.

When the amateur detective reached his office at the Paper Works he was on the point of ringing up Enquiries to ascertain the number of the telephone at 189 Eaton Square when he remembered that to-morrow was Saturday and that he would have the afternoon free to make personal enquiries in a suitable disguise.

Chapter Ten

TROUBLE IN EATON SQUARE

MEANWHILE, what had happened at the London residence of Mr. Apsley Howe? The driver of the Hold-all Transport made up his mind that he would not run the risk of a complaint by the client who had chartered his van by taking back the triple-burner paraffin-stove to 9 Chillingham Gardens. He decided to leave the stove with the bath outside 189 Eaton Square. If he and Bill unloaded quickly he felt he could count on getting away before the people in the house knew who had brought the bath back. In fact, when they saw it outside in the morning they might easily suppose it had been standing there all night still waiting for the lorry which had failed to take it away the previous evening.

It was Lady Lavinia who saw the bath first. She had woken early because she was wondering whether to go down to Sussex for the week-end and believed in judging the weather at break of day. To her disgust she saw through a drench of rain that infernal bath standing exactly where it had been standing last night when she had insisted that Apsley must compel his Principal Private Secretary to do something about getting it moved.

She turned away from the window and regarded her husband asleep in his bed. Seized with indignation by the sight of such fatuous sleep, she shook him vigorously.

"I've paired, I've paired," he muttered, emerging from a dream that the House was dividing on the question whether the Prime Minister was human and that in his anxiety to avoid committing himself to an opinion he had paired with the younger Pitt.

"Don't blither, Apsley," scolded his wife, her face glistening in the greyness of that wet October sunrise.

"The only pairing you can do in this room is with me, and you've certainly not done that."

"Oh, it's you, Lavinia. I was dreaming."

"Well, get out of bed and see what's on the pavement outside our house."

The Minister of Waste, in striped pink and grey silk pyjamas, obeyed.

"It's that bath again," he said, gaping in a combination of sleep with astonishment.

"It is," she agreed grimly. "And the sooner you get rid of that red tapeworm and find yourself a capable young woman for a secretary the better. The creature's incompetent."

"But a motor-van called and took it away about half-past twelve last night after I'd rung up Huffam. I peeped through the curtains in the drawing-room and saw it go. I can't understand it. And please, Lavinia, don't get in the habit of calling Huffam by that name."

"Well, you'd better ring him up now and ask for an explanation of the muddle."

"My dear Lavinia, it's not yet half-past six. I can't ring him up as early as this."

"Why not?"

"My dear Lavinia, you can't treat a Civil Servant in his position like a clerk."

"You're frightened of him, Apsley."

"I'm not frightened of him."

"Yes, you are, you're frightened to death. Well, if you're afraid of him, I'm not. I'm going to ring him up and ask why the bath has returned, and—my god!"

"What's the matter now?"

"I believe it's brought back with it that unutterable stove. Come here, Apsley."

The Minister of Waste went obediently to the window.

"Isn't that a stove?" his wife demanded.

"It might be almost anything," said the Minister.

"I tell you it's a stove, Apsley, and the foulest, filthiest

stove I ever saw. Dawkins told me William used half a cake of soap, two lemons, and decimated a nailbrush trying to get the lamp-black off his hands."

Lady Lavinia picked up the receiver beside her bed.

"Please, Lavinia, I must ask you not to ring up poor Huffam yet. Obviously some mistake has been made, but we must move slowly in the matter. That precipitate action of yours yesterday morning in sending that woman to the Ministry created several grave problems. We must move slowly, but depend upon it we shall find a way round these obstacles."

Although in the end the Minister managed to persuade his wife not to ring up Huffam by promising to do so himself at eight o'clock, he did not thereby save his Principal Private Secretary any sleep. Huffam's nerves had been so much strained by the events of the previous day that he had woken at about five o'clock and had been trying to woo sleep by reciting to himself the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. At last he had grown tired of Virgil and decided to get up and take a walk before breakfast.

He dressed quietly in his anxiety not to wake Gertrude, and was already out of the house when Mabel brought the morning cup of tea at seven o'clock.

"Where's the master?" Gertrude asked, sitting up and gazing in consternation at the empty place beside her.

"I don't know, madam. But I think he must have gone out, because the bolts of the front door were drawn and the chain was off when I came down. Is anything the matter, madam?"

Mabel's enquiry was caused by the sudden pallor of her mistress's face. . . .

"No, I'm quite all right, thank you, Mabel."

The maid left the room reluctantly, for, as she confided to the cook, she had been scared stiff by the look in Her face.

"I hope She isn't going to be really ill," said Cook.

"If there's one thing I can't abide in a house it's a nurse. Just take a delight in giving extra trouble, they do."

"We had a monthly nurse in the last place but one I was in," said Mabel. "She wasn't so bad. She lent me a copy of *Married Love* by this Marie Stopes."

"Who's Marie Stopes?"

"Go on, you cunning thing, Cook, as if you didn't know."

"No, really, without a joke, who is Marie Stopes?"

"I tell you, she wrote this book *Married Love*."

"Well, I hope She isn't going to be ill. I don't want any nurses running about in my kitchen," said Cook firmly.

Up in her bedroom Gertrude was trying to gain from a cup of tea the courage to face the news that Olly had left her. Then she remembered his career. Surely he would not be so mad as to wreck his career, he who had devoted his life to the Civil Service, by abandoning his wife. The colour came back into her cheeks. It was inconceivable to think of Olly's wrecking his career. To this imaginative impossibility she clung while dressing. Yes, yes, when she and Nigel and Joan entered the dining-room on the first stroke of eight Olly would be there holding *The Times* in front of the electric-stove as she had seen him holding it on so many chilly autumnal mornings.

But when, with Nigel and Joan, Gertrude did enter the dining-room that morning on the first stroke of eight Olly was not there, and *The Times* was lying on the table in the window, and the last stroke of eight was drowned in the shrill of the telephone-bell.

"Where's Daddy?" Joan asked. "Shall I answer the telephone?"

"No, no, dear, I'll answer it myself," said the anxious mother and tormented wife. If it was bad news, it must be she who heard it first.

"Is that you, Olly? . . . oh, I thought for a moment . . . no, this is Mrs. Huffam speaking . . . I'm sorry, my husband isn't in . . . is that Mr. Apsley Howe's butler?"

... oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Howe, I didn't recognise your voice ... no, my husband has already left the house ... yes, he did seem a little worried last night, Mr. Howe ... yes, certainly, if he comes back before he goes to the Ministry I'll tell him you want to see him urgently ... is there anything I can do? ... no, I don't know that he was particularly worried this morning ... yes, as soon as he comes in, I'll give him your message ... you must see him before he goes to the Ministry ... I quite understand ... good-morning, Mr. Howe. ..."

Gertrude hung up the receiver. Could the Minister have heard that Olly was on the verge of wrecking his career? Was he making a last effort to save his Principal Private Secretary? He had certainly asked in rather a strange tone of voice if Olly had seemed worried this morning. He was evidently anxious about Olly. She went back into the dining-room.

"I think we'd better begin without Father," she said tremulously. And then the click of the front-door key was heard, and a moment later he was with his family.

"I say, I'm four minutes late for breakfast," Huffam exclaimed. "By the way, Nigel, I looked over your iambs last night. You've got a final cretic in the fifth line. Do you think you'll have time to change it before you go off to school?"

Nigel was evidently much shocked by his carelessness.

"I'll have to," he muttered, and began to gobble his egg.

"Olly dear, Mr. Howe has just rung up," Gertrude began.

"Rang up at this hour of the morning? What did he want?"

"He wants you to go as soon as possible to his house."

The breakfast at 9 Chillingham Gardens was not a cheerful one that morning. Huffam was wondering if any more waste material had reached Eaton Square in spite

of the B.B.C.'s special announcement. Nigel was brooding over his final cretic. Gertrude was asking herself if she stood upon the edge of an abyss.

By 8.25 Huffam was bound for Eaton Square. As the taxi turned the corner he could not resist looking out of the window. Good god, that white thing on the pavement must be another bath! But when the taxi stopped at number 189 it proved even worse than the worst he had imagined. It was the same bath, and beside it was the triple-burner paraffin-stove. His fingers had hardly strength to press the bell.

Dawkins came portentously into the hall as the footman closed the door behind Huffam.

"Mr. Howe is anxiously expecting you, sir," he said.

"The bath came back, then?" Huffam observed as casually as he could.

"Yes, sir, the bath has returned once more, and it has arrived in the company of the stove on this occasion. Mr. Howe is in the library, sir."

The Principal Private Secretary followed Dawkins to that room in which during 1922 discontented members of the Conservative party used to plot the overthrow of the Coalition, perceiving in it at once a menace to the safety of the realm and their own political careers. Library was perhaps not the perfect description of a room whose books consisted of some bound volumes of Hansard, Whitaker's *Almanack*, *Who's Who*, Debrett's *Peerage*, Burke's *Landed Gentry*, the Foreign Office List, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and a selection of reminiscences by the various statesmen and generals that won the war. It was a quiet room at the back of the house, and when Huffam sat down opposite his Chief beside a bright fire he felt as the butler closed the door behind him a reassuring conviction of the permanence and inviolableness of British institutions in spite of that bath and triple-burner paraffin-stove on the pavement outside.

"I'm extremely distressed, sir, to find that my efforts

last night to dispose of the residue of the waste material elicited by your broadcast appeal have been frustrated."

"What happened, Huffam?"

Obviously the Principal Private Secretary could not tell his Chief that he had allowed personal feelings to outrun his discretion by despatching the bath and the stove to the residence of Mr. Robert Glegg. However good it might be, the Minister could hardly be expected to appreciate a joke that recoiled on his own head.

"Well, sir, I arranged with the Holdall Transport Company to convey the bath and stove to the dump on which I successfully deposited the waste material evacuated yesterday evening, and I can only surmise that the driver failed to locate the place, which is situated approximately half a mile south of the town of Hodford. It is called Nobbs' Bottom. I shall get into communication with the Holdall Transport Company at the earliest possible moment and endeavour to ascertain how the error arose, but, as I say, sir, I have little doubt it was due to the failure of the driver to locate Nobbs' Bottom, and no doubt at such an hour of the night he would have experienced difficulty in obtaining information about the topography of Hodford."

"But why did the bath come back here the first time?" Mr. Howe asked. "I found it outside when I got home from the House."

"I'm afraid I must accept the blame for that," Huffam admitted. "In the first instance the bath was conveyed to Nobbs' Bottom by a station-omnibus, the driver of which expressed a desire to take it home with him. I realised that in approving such a course of action I was taking it upon myself to dispose of Government property, but inasmuch as the bath would undoubtedly have been scheduled as waste material, and as its premature delivery had raised a problem, I felt, after considering the question carefully, that on my own responsibility I could sanction the transfer of it to Argles."

"Argles? Who is Argles?"

"Argles is 'the name of the driver of the station-omnibus."

"That's clear to me now. Sorry to interrupt you, but I wanted to get that point perfectly clear before you proceeded with your report."

"Argles therefore took the bath back with him to Pimlico—Porson Street is the address—and I can only surmise that on discovering the bath had a hole in the bottom . . ."

"Nobbs' Bottom, I think you called this place?"

"No, sir, that is the name of the dump. The hole was in the bottom of the bath."

"Ah, I see. You confused me rather."

"I'm sorry, sir, but what I was going to say was that probably Mrs. Argles . . ."

"That's the wife of Argles?" the Minister asked intelligently.

"Precisely, sir. Probably Mrs. Argles refused to allow her husband to instal the bath, and probably he in a fit of irritation brought the bath back to the place it came from."

"And I suppose it was Argles who painted that extremely offensive question on the inside?"

"Unless it was Mrs. Argles, sir."

"Yes, of course that is a conceivable alternative. But do you think a woman would paint an objectionable word like 'bloody' on the inside of a bath?"

"I think in the circumstances she might give vent to her feelings even to that extent."

"Possibly you're right. I suppose you never noticed the bath had a hole in it?"

"I did not, sir. I should have advised Argles in that sense if I had."

"That of course would have been the appropriate procedure. But did you hand over that horrible stove to Argles also?"

Huffam gave an account of the stove's adventure in Tottenden.

"Then why didn't the driver of this motor-van bring the stove to your house?"

"Unless subsequent investigations should modify such a conclusion a certain remissness on the part of the driver seems indicated, and I shall take up that point with the Holdall Transport Company."

"After all, it was from you he got his orders, and when he was unable to find the place you sent him to it was clearly his duty to notify you that he had failed to carry out those orders. Then the bath could either have been left outside your house or you could have given him supplementary directions. I'm not worrying about the bath myself, but Lady Lavinia unfortunately caught sight of it at half-past six this morning, and I am most anxious that she should definitely see the last of this bath once and for all."

"I fully realise that, sir. I think with your permission I will try to get in touch at once with the Holdall Transport Company."

Huffam went across to his Chief's desk and took up the telephone receiver.

"Museum 76451 . . . hullo! is that the Holdall Transport Company? . . . I rang you up last night from 9 Chillingham Gardens and ordered a motor-van to convey a bath from 189 Eaton Square and a stove from 9 Chillingham Gardens to Hodford . . . yes, that's right . . . well, your driver apparently failed to locate the place, and both the bath and the stove are now at 189 Eaton Square . . . the driver will not report for duty until two o'clock? . . . well, can't you send another driver immediately? . . . you haven't a van available at the moment? . . . but you advertise that your vans are available at any hour of the day or night . . . you expect one in very shortly . . . well, will you send it along as soon as it comes in to 189 Eaton Square and instruct the driver to remove the bath and

the stove which are now standing on the pavement outside the house . . . possibly you know of a rubbish dump nearer than Hodford where articles of this nature can be deposited? . . . oh, you do? . . . that's excellent . . . well, will you . . ." Huffam put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to the Minister.

"Shall I tell them to recover their expenses from your butler, sir?"

"Certainly."

Huffam spoke into the receiver.

"Will you instruct your driver to recover his expenses from the butler at 189 Eaton Square? . . . that's clearly understood? . . . and you will send a van at the first possible moment? . . . thank you."

Huffam put down the receiver with a sigh of relief.

"Well, sir, I don't think we shall be bothered any more with the bath or the stove."

"No, I think we've discovered a formula," the Minister agreed. "It gives one a notion, doesn't it, Huffam, of the immense organisation we shall require when our scheme for collecting waste material comes into full operation? Personally I'm very glad to have had this opportunity of a little practical experience. I always maintain that no amount of theory is any good without experience."

"That's very true, sir."

"I am coming round to the opinion that we should not hold up the issue of our pamphlet on account of that question pending between us and the Ministry of Production as to the collection of waste rubber. I feel we should issue a supplementary pamphlet when that question is settled. By the way, all the necessary sites for collecting and classifying waste have been acquired, haven't they?"

"I understand so, sir."

"It's a pity in a way we didn't think of trying out one of them with all this waste material that was sent in after my broadcast," said the Minister.

"I think that might have caused confusion, sir. The Zonal, Area and District Controllers would hardly have the machinery for dealing with waste before the details of the scheme have been published. It would almost certainly have caused confusion. There's already a good deal of difficulty in establishing the exact functions of the Zonal, Area and District Controllers of Waste and their relations one to another. A sudden influx might have caused friction. I think if I may say so, sir, we did the right thing in treating the premature contributions as outside the scope of our general plan."

"Yes, I dare say you're right."

"And after that unfortunate little piece of publicity yesterday I submit we were wise not to give the Press a further opportunity of cavilling."

"Yes, this Press cavilling is very unfair. They got their knife into the Ministry of Waste during the war when we had to cut down so much all round in the interest of national economy, and there's no doubt they hoped that after the war we should cease to exist as a Ministry. They resent our efficiency."

"Quite, quite. And then, sir, you've not improved your popularity with the Press by broadcasting. The Press hates the B.B.C., and if it had leaked out that the public had not understood your broadcast there's no doubt the Press would have rubbed it in."

"But, damn it, Huffam, the public did understand my broadcast. All except a few enthusiastic nitw . . . I mean patriots."

"Quite, quite, sir. But the Press would have fastened on to the exceptions and done all it could to exaggerate the situation."

At this moment Lady Lavinia put her head round the door, suggesting as she did so a chestnut mare looking out of her stable.

"Good-morning, Mr. Huffam. Has anything been settled yet about this rubbish?"

"Arrangements have been made, Lady Lavinia, to remove the waste material at the earliest possible moment."

"Yes, but you promised that before, Mr. Huffam. And look at the pavement. Well, I can't stand it any longer, Apsley. I'm going down to High Fettle by the 10.25. I'm taking Dawkins, Mrs. Drakeford, and of course Titley. If you can't get down till to-morrow you'd better dine at the House to-night, though Susan can quite well get you dinner if you must dine at home."

"Have you asked many people for the week-end, Lavinia?" her husband enquired, a little nervously.

"The house will be full. I can't remember exactly who's coming. I've been ringing people up all the morning. Well, you know my plans now. I only hope we have no more nonsense over the week-end with baths and what not."

Lady Lavinia vanished.

"I'm afraid she's taken this bath business rather to heart, Huffam. I'm glad it's settled now."

"Yes, sir. Well, unless you want me further, I think I'd better be going along to the Ministry."

"I shan't be there much before noon. I have an appointment with my dentist this morning."

Reflecting on the interview with his Chief while walking across St. James's Park, Huffam wished he had alluded again to the agreeable suggestion he had made over the telephone last night about the prospect of his getting a C.B. rather earlier than he might normally expect it. There had been plenty about the bath but not another word about the Bath. However, no doubt an opportunity would present itself of reminding the Minister of his promise without appearing to be doing so.

When the Assistant Janitor saluted him on entering Wharton House that morning Huffam stopped to speak to him.

"Good-morning, Sergeant. I ran against a relation of yours last night."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, a brother-in-law of yours in the police at Tottenham. Sergeant Barclay."

"I hope you ran against him pleasantly in a manner of speaking, sir?"

"Very pleasantly. He was extremely helpful."

"Yes, he's a very nice fellow, though of course, like all the police, a bit serious-minded about himself."

Huffam passed on toward his room. He never entered the Ministry without a glow of satisfaction in the welcome atmosphere of bureaucratic dignity and power. Such a glow of satisfaction may the real tapeworm feel from the snugness of the alimentary canal of *Homo Sapiens* after its precarious entertainment by inferior hosts. He nodded with kindly condescension to the Assistant Principals and Principals he met on the great marble staircase of Wharton House and sat down to examine the correspondence on the desk. Looking up for a moment at the painted ceiling and catching, as it were, the eye of a nymph at whose exiguous draperies a satyr clutched, he was reminded (it might be difficult to say why) that he and Gertrude had parted that morning without that perfect accord which had marked the whole of their married life. He decided to ring her up.

"Olly speaking, dear . . . just to let you know that there is nothing to worry about . . . the Minister was perplexed over a small matter which I was able to put right quickly . . . are you feeling all right? I wonder if you'd like to meet me for lunch somewhere . . . I suggest that place in Soho where we sometimes go . . . that's right, the *Petite Sardine* . . . I'll meet you there at a quarter past one . . . yes, I knew you'd realise that, but don't say any more just now . . . you shall tell me at lunch . . . good-bye."

Huffam rang for Miss Wicker, his amanuensis, and settled himself down to his morning's work.

Chapter Eleven

HOLDALL TRANSPORT

WHEN the driver of the Holdall Transport Company's motor-van arrived at 189 Eaton Square he found no butler to pay him. Dawkins was already on the way to High Fettle. The Minister had left to keep his appointment with the dentist. William agreed that the bath and stove were to be called for, but would not accept any financial responsibility for the transaction. The driver of the van, who was a stolid cautious fellow, decided to remove the bath and the stove, but before committing himself further to consult the boss at 805 Euston Road. As he drove into the yard about half-past eleven he saw his fellow-driver Caffyn coming away from the office of Mr. Cordingley the manager.

"Hullo, Fred," he called out. "You're back early."

"Ah," said Caffyn, "it's just as well you come back yourself, George Hipkiss, you might have been in bad with the police if you hadn't. I've just been warning Mr. Cordingley."

The plump face of George Hipkiss flushed.

"What do you mean, Fred Caffyn?" he growled. "Are you saying I'm wanted by the police?"

"I'm not saying you're wanted yet, but I'm saying you soon might have been. You'd better go in and see Mr. Cordingley before you go anywhere with that load of trouble you're carrying. I had it last night, and by luck I got quit of it."

George Hipkiss had alighted from his van, prepared, cautious and stolid man though he was, to do battle if necessary for his good name.

"Now then, Fred Caffyn, just repeat what you said about me being wanted by the police," he challenged.

"Go on, don't be so soppy, George. What would I want to come down to the yard a couple of hours before I need except to give the boss a warning about that bath? It's no good glaring at me so vicious. I've been acting for your own good. Go in and speak to Mr. Cordingley if you don't believe me."

The caution of George Hipkiss overcame his indignation. He decided to interview the boss before knocking Fred Caffyn into the middle of next week.

"Ah, I'm glad you came in, Hipkiss," said Mr. Cordingley, a small, dark, sharp-featured man who looked as if he had been soaked a long age in heavy oil. "We can't afford to touch that bath and stove."

"I came in, Mr. Cordingley, because I couldn't find the butler from who I was told to collect the charges for transporting the bath and stove to that dump this side of Uxbridge."

"Wait a minute, I'll find out who lives at 189 Eaton Square," said the Manager. He reached for the Post Office Directory.

"Good lord!" he exclaimed. "The Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P.! I wonder how Mr. Chowne didn't look that up last night when he took that order Caffyn carried out. Now we're in a nice pickle. Caffyn was warned last night not to touch this job and he brought back the stuff where he took it from. I wonder what we'd better do. Wait a minute, I'll look up the fellow who gave the order over the 'phone. Oliver Huffam, C.B.E., 9 Chillingham Gardens. That sounds respectable enough. I'll lay whoever wants to get rid of this stuff used his name. I wonder if I ought to ring up Scotland Yard. I hate dragging the police into anything. Wait a moment. I'll try Chillingham Gardens."

"Hullo? is that Kensington 49932? . . . this is Holdall Transport speaking . . . we want to get in touch with Mr. Oliver Huffam . . . Mr Huffam is out . . . is that Mrs Oliver Huffam? . . . she's out too . . . where could I get in touch

with Mr. Huffam? . . . Ministry of Waste . . . thank you."

The Manager hung up the receiver.

"The only thing for you to do, Hipkiss," he decided, "is to run round right away to the Ministry of Waste. Know where that is?"

Hipkiss shook his head.

"Well, it's behind Whitehall, Wharton Terrace. Any policeman outside will direct you. When you've found it, ask for Mr. Huffam and find out from him whether anyone's been using his name. There's something queer about this business. It's suddenly come back to me that Apsley Howe, M.P., is the Minister of Waste. I heard him over the wireless the other night."

"That's right, Mr. Cordingley. I heard him myself. Had a kind of a squeaky voice. My missus said it was worse than the roller of our kitchen towel."

"Go and give Caffyn a call, Hipkiss. I'd like to get this business a bit clearer."

When the driver of last night's van came into the office he was invited to relate his story again.

"Then you actually saw this fellow who called himself Huffam?" the Manager asked.

"Of course I saw him. Bill Johnson and me both saw him. Tall, thin, pale, ginger-headed fellow, a bit la-di-da in his speaking. It was him gave the instructions to collect the bath in Eaton Square and be particular careful not to disturb any of the people in the house."

"Oh, he made a big point of that, did he?" the Manager observed.

"That's what Mr. Chowne told me when I come in from that job I'd been doing in Walthamstow and received orders to go to Hodford. But I was to get further instructions from this Huffam at 9 Chillingham Gardens. Well, Bill and me put the bath out of the van because I thought the bath was for Chillingham Gardens. And this Huffam, he was a bit short with me and told me to

put it back at once in the van and collect the stove. Well, stove I say, but a bottle of blacking would be white in a manner of speaking against that stove."

"Shocking!" Hipkiss put in. "Me and Jack had some of it just now." He displayed his hands.

"That's the stuff," Caffyn said. "Kind of an oily black, which gets right into you."

"That's right, Fred," his colleague agreed. "Sort of oozes into you."

"That's enough about the black," Mr. Cordingley broke in impatiently. "Get on with it, Caffyn."

"Well, this Huffam told me to leave the bath and the stove outside the Hodford Paper Works, and of course I said I knew Mr. Glegg the manager and told how we'd often done a job of work for him. So then he said to leave the bath and stove inside Mr. Glegg's gate, and which I was going to do when Mr. Glegg himself hops off a motor-bike and advises me to take the bath and stove back where they come from if I didn't want to find myself mixed up in a police case. I was in two minds whether to leave 'em outside Eaton Square or Chillingham Gardens, but as I didn't want an argument with this Huffam if he heard us planting the bath down outside his house, I settled on Eaton Square."

"It was a pity you didn't report to Mr. Chowne when you came in."

"Yes, when you put it that way, Mr. Cordingley, I suppose it was, but you know how anybody feels when people start talking about the police, and knowing Mr. Glegg, I reckoned the best thing was to say nothing."

"What puzzles me," said the Manager, "is why this Mr. Huffam rang me up this morning and said you couldn't have found the place in Hodford when you told him you knew where Mr. Glegg lived. Well, there's only one thing to do, and that is for you to take the stuff round to the Ministry of Waste and find out if the Mr.

Huffam there is the same as the fellow who gave you the instructions last night."

"But I don't come on duty till two o'clock, Mr. Cordingley," Caffyn protested. "Why can't Hipkiss take the stuff?"

"Yes, and get mixed up with the police," Hipkiss put in. "You took on this job, Fred. You oughter see it through."

"Besides, it was you who took the orders from this Mr. Huffam so called," the Manager pointed out. "I'll arrange you get off early to-night. If it's a police business we don't want Holdall Transport to be mixed up in it, and if it *is* a police business we'll be right in it so long as we have this bath and stove on our hands. I wonder if it's murder."

"Murder?" Caffyn echoed.

"You never know," said Mr. Cordingley.

"That's right, you don't never know," echoed the stolid and cautious Hipkiss who, now that the responsibility of the bath and stove had been handed back to his colleague, was rather hoping it was murder. Fred Caffyn in the witness-box would give them all something to read in the *News of the World* on a Sunday morning.

"Bill Johnson isn't here," Caffyn said in a desperate effort to find another obstacle.

"You can take Jack Williams."

"That's right. I won't be wanting him now," said Hipkiss, full of encouragement.

"Yes, you think you won't be in on this, George Hipkiss," said Caffyn bitterly. "But you'll be in on it just as much as me. And very funny you'll look in the witness-box when the lawyers start cross-examining you. Laughter in court? I reckon it'll sound like the Holborn Empire, I do."

"Now, you've got this clear, Caffyn?" the Manager asked. "You'll go to the Ministry of Waste and ask for Mr. Oliver Huffam. If he's the same as the fellow you

saw in Chillingham Gardens, tell him Holdall Transport doesn't care to accept the responsibility for the disposal of this bath and stove as per arrangement made this morning between the Manager and him. Then leave the bath and the stove and come right back. Got that?"

"Am I to charge him anything?" Caffyn asked.

"No, we'll have to lose that."

"If he asks me why we won't handle this stuff, what do I say? Do I give a hint about the police?"

"Good lord, no. Just say we were misinformed about that dump this side of Uxbridge."

"And suppose this Huffam at the Ministry of Waste is a different Huffam altogether?" Caffyn asked. "What do I do then?"

The Manager paused.

"Well, I suppose in that case there is nothing for it but to drive round to Scotland Yard and inform the police," he said gloomily at last.

It was just after one when Caffyn drove his van into the courtyard of Wharton House and pulled up in front of the Corinthian portico.

"Mr. Huffam?" he enquired of Sergeant-Major Pond.

The Janitor eyed Caffyn balefully. He had not yet forgotten that lorry-load of scrap iron.

"Mr. Huffam has just gone."

"Well, I wanted to see him very particular."

"I tell you he's gone out to his lunch."

"Where can I find him?"

"You can't find him anywhere. Call again after three o'clock."

Caffyn tried another tack.

"But Mr. Huffam wants to see me particular."

"If he'd wanted to see you so particular he'd have given you an appointment. Did he give you an appointment?"

"No, but . . ."

"Very well, then, what are you arguing about?"

"I'm not arguing."

"What are you doing, then?"

"I want to see Mr. Huffam."

"And I tell you he's gone to lunch."

At this moment Upwey, the Assistant Private Secretary, passed by on his way out and overheard Caffyn's statement.

"You want to see Mr. Huffam?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Yes, sir, and it's very particular because Mr. Huffam wants to see me. It's about a job of work my firm are doing for him, and if I wait till he comes back from his lunch it may be too late."

"Well, I happen to know he's lunching at the Petite Sardine in Greek Street, Soho."

"Thank you, sir. What was the word in front of Sardine?"

"Petite."

Upwey spelt it, and Caffyn noted it down on a piece of paper.

"Thank you very much, sir. I'll drive along there now." Caffyn darted a triumphant look at Sergeant-Major Pond, who scowled.

"It's your responsibility, Mr. Upwey," he reminded the Assistant Private Secretary. "I wouldn't like Mr. Huffam to think I'd taken it upon myself to interrupt him at lunch."

"I'll explain to him, Sergeant-Major."

Huffam himself was just ascending the steps of the Petite Sardine when the Holdall van drove up and Caffyn jumped out.

"Hi! Mr. Huffam!" he called.

The Principal Private Secretary turned round in astonishment.

"Just a minute, sir, please."

"What is it you want?" He read the name on the van.

"Oh," he said brightly, "you've come to tell me you have

disposed of the articles about which I telephoned this morning?"

"No, sir."

"No?"

"No, sir, they're here. They're in the van."

So far as his already pale complexion would allow him, Huffam blenched.

"Whatever he done with that bath and that stove it was haunting him," Caffyn told the Manager when he returned to Euston Road.

"But why have your people not carried out their instructions?" Huffam asked.

"They can't."

"Why not?"

Caffyn shook his head.

"I can't tell you that, sir. All I was told was I must find you at once and hand back both articles."

"But you can't hand me back a bath and a stove at a restaurant."

"I can put them out on the pavement."

"But how can I dispose of a bath and a stove on a Soho pavement?"

"That's up to you, sir," said Caffyn firmly.

"I never heard anything so preposterous. You'd better take the things back to Euston Road. I'll telephone to the Manager."

"It's more than my place is worth to do that, sir. I had strict orders to hand back the things to you."

"Well, you'd better drive them to 9 Chillingham Gardens. Wait a minute, I'll give you a note for the parlour-maid."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't take the things to Chillingham Gardens. I was told particular at the office to have nothing more to do with Chillingham Gardens."

"Are the people at your office congenital idiots?" Huffam asked angrily.

"I don't know, sir, but those were my orders. They

didn't say anything about not taking them back to 189 Eaton Square," Caffyn added on an inspiration. "I'll deliver them there if you like."

"No, no, no," said Huffam quickly.

"And in my opinion," Caffyn related of this negative afterwards, "what he done wrong he done in Eaton Square, not in Chillingham Gardens, because when I suggested taking back the bath and the stove to Eaton Square he shook all over. Haunted, that's what he is."

"No," Huffam repeated. "I don't want the things taken back to Eaton Square."

"Well, sir, you'll have to settle soon where you do want them taken, or else I'll have to put them out here."

Quite apart from the difficulty of dealing with the problem of a bath and a triple-burner paraffin-stove on the pavement of a thoroughfare so much devoted to the gratification of idle curiosity as Greek Street, Huffam feared to reawaken those suspicions of Gertrude's which he trusted he had now allayed.

"You'd better take the things to the Ministry of Waste."

Caffyn looked doubtful.

"The bloke at the door in uniform might create," he objected.

"I'll give you a note for the Janitor. You can wait in the courtyard till I get back from lunch."

Caffyn shook his head.

"No, sir, I've got to report at once to our office. I'll deliver the things at the Ministry of Waste, but that's as far as I can go. It is really."

Huffam had to make a quick decision, which is an excruciating pain for a Civil Servant.

"Very well," he said at last. "You can take the things to the Ministry. I'll ring through and advise the Janitor of their arrival."

The last suggestion was a ruse on the part of Huffam. He had no intention of advising Sergeant-Major Pond. He was trusting that Sergeant-Major Pond would refuse

to accept the bath and the stove and that the driver of the van would be compelled to take them back to the Euston Road garage of the Holdall Transport Company. There he hoped he should be able to prevail upon them to adopt a sensible view of the situation and carry out the original proposal.

"Very good, sir," said Caffyn, "if you'll let the porter know at the Ministry of Waste I'll deliver the bath and the stove there."

He went back to his seat in the front of the van, and Huffam hurried into the restaurant, where he found Gertrude toying nervously with the menu-card.

"Sorry to be a few minutes late, dear," he told her, "but we've had another terribly busy morning at the Ministry."

"Olly, I want to say how sorry I am for my suspicions last night." She put her hand on his arm. "You've forgiven me?"

"Nothing to forgive, dear. You'd like to start with mixed *bors d'œuvres*?"

"Yes, dear. Anything. I must have been overtired, and I had been worrying about you all the evening."

"It's quite understood, dear."

"I did so much appreciate your ringing me up and asking me to have lunch with you. It took a weight off my mind."

Huffam smiled sympathetically. Then he turned to the waiter.

"*Hors d'œuvres variés.*"

"*Bien, monsieur! Des bors d'œuvres variés.*"

The cheese-faced youthful waiter who wheeled round the *bors d'œuvres* brought up his selection and another time-honoured Soho lunch began.

Huffam made it clear to his wife that he did not want to discuss the emotional clash of last night. It was to be regarded as a brief headache which had vanished. He raised his glass of Sauterne and she sipped her response.

They had always drunk Sauterne together when the occasion demanded celebration ever since Gertrude had tasted it for the first time on their honeymoon and thought it so nice and sweet.

While the Huffams were passing from *hors d'œuvres* to *sole bonne femme* and from *sole bonne femme* to *poulet rôti* several lines were added to the Odyssey of the bath and stove.

Sergeant-Major Pond had retired at a quarter past one to take his lunch in a chophouse at the Trafalgar Square end of Whitehall. Sergeant Perkins, V.C., was on duty in the almost empty Ministry. He was not due for his lunch until the Janitor returned at a quarter past two, and in spite of having been accustomed to this hour for several years now the emptiness of the Ministry still found almost literally an echo in the emptiness of the Assistant Janitor's inside. Always a man with what his wife called a temper of his own, he was inclined to nurse it between a quarter past one and a quarter past two.

Sergeant Perkins had not been present at the earlier interview between the Janitor and the driver of the Holdall van, having been occupied somewhere else in the building at the time.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply when Caffyn presented himself at the Janitor's desk.

"I've brought this bath and stove according to orders. Where do you want 'em put?"

"Bath and stove? What do you mean bath and stove? This is the Ministry of Waste."

"I know it's the Ministry of Waste," said Caffyn. "And I've brought this bath and stove according to orders."

"Orders from who?"

"A Mr. Huffam give me them."

The Assistant Janitor looked among the memoranda on the desk.

"There's no record here of any orders from Mr. Huffam about a bath and stove."

"I can't help that."

"Perhaps you can't, but that doesn't say you can come here with baths and stoves without me having previous instructions."

"Mr. Huffam said he'd given instructions."

"When did he say so?"

"Just now."

"Where?"

"In the something Sardine."

"Come on now, young fellow, I don't want any funny answers from you," said Sergeant Perkins, reddening.

"I'm not giving you funny answers. Caffyn fumbled in his pocket. "That's right, the Pe-tight Sardine. I disremembered what came in front of Sardine."

"Well, Mr. Huffam won't be back before three. So you'll have to wait," Sergeant Perkins snapped. "I'm not taking any orders from Sardines."

"It's a restarong."

"Well, this isn't a restarong," said Sergeant Perkins, with some bitterness.

"Who said it was?" Caffyn asked, justifiably. "And I can't hang about here till three o'clock. I've got to get back to my garage. I'll leave the bath and stove."

"You'll do what?"

"Do you want them inside, or will it do if we put them down in the yard?"

"Now look here," said the Assistant Janitor wrathfully, "I've had just about enough of you *and* your bath and stove. If Mr. Huffam ordered a bath and stove he ordered them for his own house, I suppose, and you've messed up your instructions and brought them to the Ministry instead."

"I haven't done any such a thing. I took them away from Mr. Huffam's house."

Sergeant Perkins shook his head.

"It sounds a queer tale to me, but I'll let you wait with your van in the courtyard till Mr. Huffam comes in. But

put it round at the side. You can't stand in front of the main entrance."

"I can't stand anywhere. I tell you I've got to get back to my garage."

"Hop it, then. Do you think I've got nothing better to do than listen to your troubles?"

"Where will I put the bath and the stove?" Caffyn persisted, a sullen note of obstinacy in his tones.

"Put 'em where the monkey put the nuts," Sergeant Perkins roared.

Caffyn turned on his heel and walked out of the hall. There was much he would have liked to retort to the Assistant Janitor, many epithets he would have enjoyed flinging in his face; but the time for words was past. Action was now imperative. He jumped up on the van and drove away.

Half an hour later, when Huffam emerged from the Petite Sardine with the intention of escorting Gertrude as far as the Piccadilly tube before returning to the Ministry, he saw the bath and the stove on the pavement outside.

Gertrude clutched his arm.

"Olly!" she gasped.

Huffam decided to ignore the persistent articles.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Olly, the bath! The stove!"

"Oh yes, I see," he said, assuming a tone of exaggerated carelessness. "Somebody moving their goods and chattels."

At that moment the doorkeeper of the restaurant, a loose-limbed man with a ragged moustache and a uniform which looked as if port-wine had been spilt on a brown suit, touched his cap and said:

"What would you like done with your things, sir?"

"What things?"

"This bath and paraffin-stove?"

If his wife had not been with him Huffam might have tried to disown the vile articles, but he felt that to do so

would bring back to life all those ridiculous suspicions he had just been drowning in Sauterne.

"Oh, those are mine, are they?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. They were left here by a motor-van. I didn't like to interrupt you while you were at your lunch."

"No, quite. Well, I'd like to leave them here for the present. They never ought to have come here. It's a stupid mistake of the driver's. They're not in your way, are they?"

"They're not in *my* way, sir. But Mr. Gustave carried on about them a bit just now."

From the corner of his eye Huffam could see the proprietor of the Petite Sardine, who looked exactly like *Punch's* idea of a Frenchman before the Entente Cordiale, glaring through the glass from the other side of the restaurant door. He thought it would be tactful to apologise and turned back inside.

"I'm sorry about those things of mine out there, Monsieur Gustave, but I'll send along to fetch them away as soon as possible."

"Ah, please, sir, I must ask you to take them away with you now. It is ver' bad for us. It makes people to stop and stare."

"My difficulty is transport," Huffam told him. "That bath won't go on a taxi."

"Have you tried, Oliver?" his wife asked sharply.

"Please, Gertrude, let me deal with this stupid business."

In his preoccupation with the problem of transport he did not notice Gertrude had abandoned the familiar diminutive. It did not strike him that far from being helpful she was by her question implying an accusation. He turned back to the *patron* of the Petite Sardine. "I'll send for the bath and stove at the first possible opportunity," he promised.

M. Gustave shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot permit them to stay here, please."

"Well, I can't remove them until I can get some kind of conveyance, can I?" Huffam asked.

"But I will not accept no responsibility for them," the *patron* insisted.

"I don't want you to," Huffam declared earnestly. "If they vanish, well, they vanish. Don't let that bother you. If they've vanished by the time the conveyance arrives, don't worry yourself at all. I shall perfectly understand."

"But, please, I awp you will send quickly to take them away."

"I will, I will. Call me a taxi," he told the doorkeeper. It was not Huffam's habit to indulge in taxis unless he could charge them on his travelling expenses; but he could not bear the thought of walking down Greek Street with that infernal bath and even more infernal stove watching his back all the length of it.

He tipped the doorkeeper as he got into the taxi.

"Thank you, sir. I'll keep an eye on your bath and stove till you send for them."

"No, don't bother to do that," said Huffam. "I really do not want you to worry about them. They can look after themselves."

Gertrude was silent during the drive to Piccadilly, but she turned back impulsively from the entrance to the tube station.

"Ollly, I do believe in you. I do trust you," she half-sobbed, and a moment later was lost in the ticket queue.

Huffam walked on down Regent Street. He hoped Gertrude was not going to give way to silliness. Perhaps he should have taken her more fully into his confidence, but that would be setting a precedent of which he disapproved. He did not like mixing up his official with his domestic life. Nevertheless, that bath and that stove must somehow be got rid of once and for all. He quickened his pace as he turned round into Pall Mall.

Chapter Twelve

SIR CLAUD HUNTBATH

ALLUSION has been made to the District Controllers of Waste who, when the signal was given by the circulation of the pamphlet to twenty million of the people of England, Scotland, Wales and (by special licence from Lord Craigavon) Northern Ireland too, would in the closest co-operation with County and Municipal authorities set about the practical working of the great scheme. Each pamphlet would include three forms—buff, pink, and pale green—which when filled up by the recipients would be sent to the District Controllers. They, from the information contained in these forms, would issue white forms known respectively as A, B, C, and D on which owners and gatherers of waste would make application for it to be removed and paid for according to the schedule of prices on page 34 of the pamphlet. These District Controllers, acting in the closest co-operation with County and Municipal authorities in order to avoid overlapping by the employment of extraneous dust and refuse waggons, had been busy for some months in advising the Area Controllers to advise the Zonal Controllers to advise the Regional Controllers to advise the Ministry of Waste to acquire some of the best agricultural land in the country, in order to provide great waste dumps all over Britain. They worked directly under the orders of the Chief Controller at the Ministry of Waste except in so far as they were under the orders of the Area Controllers, whose own authority was tempered by the authority of whatever counties or boroughs came within their Area, not to mention the authority of the Zonal Controllers whose principal job was to smooth out any difficulties arising between Area Controllers and the

representatives of Local Government. Neither the Zonal Controllers nor the Area Controllers were paid for their work apart from their expenses, and therefore in practice the District Controllers paid by the Ministry were the only people who had any real say in the question of waste. At the same time everything was done by the Ministry to persuade the Zonal and Area Controllers that their voluntary work was of vital importance to the welfare of the country, and to this end Regional Controllers had been appointed above them who were also unpaid. It may be asked why the Zonal and Area Controllers should think more of themselves and their efforts because there were Regional Controllers above them, and the answer is that just as every Area Controller wanted to become a Zonal Controller so every Zonal Controller cherished an ambition to become a Regional Controller. And what was the reward of a Regional Controller? Well, nobody in the world of waste could be anything higher than a Regional Controller, surely a satisfaction in itself, and in any case it is preposterous to ask such a question, because the Regional Controllers were regional magnates of one kind and another, and the regional magnates of Great Britain and Ireland have a tradition of amateur service to which eloquent tribute has been paid by Lord Baldwin.

While Huffam had been lunching at the Petite Sardine with his wife the Regional Controller of the Highlands and Islands had been lunching with Sir Claud Huntbath at Snooks's. Like the Minister the Permanent Secretary was a member of the Heraeum, but he preferred Snooks's, of which distinguished club he was the only member at the Ministry of Waste and would not have hesitated to blackball even any transient Minister who had been put up for it.

The Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands was MacDonald of Ben Nevis, and fired by the complaints of some of his Zonal Controllers and Area Controllers he had come to London from Glenbogle

Castle to register personally a strong protest against what he maintained was the arbitrary division of Scotland into two regions without regard for geography, history, or economics.

"The proper way to divide the country was into east and west," he maintained, his crimson eagle's beak deepening to a wrathful purple. "If you'd taken longitude 4 and given me all to the west of that and Lord Peebles all to the east we should have achieved an equitable division."

Sir Claud Huntbath was not sufficiently at home with longitude and latitude to reply offhand to this challenge. He told one of the club waiters to bring him *The Times* atlas.

"But if we took longitude 4, Mr. MacDonald, we should be cutting through no less than nine counties and the whole point of approximating our Area Controls as far as possible to the areas of County Councils would thereby be nullified. The resultant overlapping would be terrible—terrible."

The purple of the Chieftain's eagle's beak deepened to darkest amaranth, not because the Permanent Secretary was objecting to his longitudinal division but because he had addressed him as Mr. MacDonald instead of as Ben Nevis. These fellows in Whitehall!

Sir Claud, unconscious of the sin he had committed and repeating it, continued:

"Whereas, Mr. MacDonald, if you look at the division we made, which represented as far as possible the division between the Highlands and the Lowlands, you will see that by taking a line westward from Aberdeen we have only cut into one County Council, Argyll that is. I admit we did consider the advisability of placing the whole of Argyll with the Highlands and Islands, but we received a petition from the people of Oban asking not to be included in the same region as Inverness, and that decided us to take Loch L-I-N-N-H-E—I'm not perfectly sure

how you pronounce that—my mountaineering has always been done either in the Lakes or Wales—to take Loch Linn . . .”

“Linny, not Linn,” growled Ben Nevis.

“Loch Linnhe and the Firth of Lorne as the southerly boundary of your region.”

“But if I’m Regional Controller of the Highlands and Islands, why are Islay and Jura and Bute and Arran given to Peebles, who is Regional Controller of the Lowlands only?”

“Well, I’m informed that Perthshire considers itself part of the Highlands.”

“I’m not so much worried about Perthshire,” said Ben Nevis. “What I think we should have is Glasgow. And if the division were made east and west of longitude 4 we should have Glasgow.”

“But you have Aberdeen, Mr. MacDonald.”

“Aberdeen! What waste material are we going to find in Aberdeen?”

“And if Lord Peebles has one or two islands in the south-west, you have Orkney and Shetland.”

“I don’t want Orkney and Shetland,” Ben Nevis protested indignantly. “As things are at present the Area Controller at Fort William, Hugh Cameron of Kilwhillie, cannot do anything with Mull, Ardgour, Morvern, or Ardnamurchan because Sir George Campbell of Drumtucket, the Area Controller of South Argyll, deliberately uses every dastardly Campbell trick to make Kilwhillie’s task impossible.”

The Permanent Secretary’s brain gasped in this spate of Highland topography and titles.

“And what exactly do you propose, Mr. MacDonald?”

“Look here, I’m sorry, Sir Claud, but do you mind very much not calling me Mr. MacDonald?”

“We get so habituated to formality in the Civil Service,” the Permanent Secretary said in excuse. “It be-

comes second nature. But I appreciate the friendliness of the suggestion, and I can assure you . . . MacDonald, we are most anxious at the Ministry not to tread on Highland susceptibilities in any way."

"Well, then, will you call me Ben Nevis, if you don't mind?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Sir Claud, wondering who was responsible for suggesting the appointment of this discontented megalomaniac to be Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands.

"It is the custom in my country to address me as Ben Nevis," the Chieftain repeated, the amaranth of his eagle's beak by now showing signs of deepening even to the blue-black of the raven's wing.

The Permanent Secretary groped back into the shadow-land of his childhood when he had read the novels of Sir Walter Scott. There recurred to him from that misty past a memory of something like this. He must try to forget that Ben Nevis was the highest mountain in the British Isles and accept it as the name of a tall gentleman with hair like his pet Airedale when it met the Irish terrier further along Hamilton Terrace, an eagle's beak, and a suit of aggressively brown tweeds which brought back the perfume of blankets drying over his high nursery fender long before he had ever read Scott.

Sir Claud nerved himself for the plunge.

"What exactly do you propose, . . . Ben Nevis?"

"Well, as you won't accept my suggestion to divide Scotland into west and east regions by longitude 4, why not take a line north of the Firth of Tay so as to include Kincardine, Angus, Perth and Argyll with Bute and Arran in my region?"

"But that gives you rather more than two-thirds of Scotland," Sir Claud gasped. This was the result of addressing a man as Ben Nevis.

"In extent, yes," the Chieftain agreed, "but it still leaves Lord Peebles with a great superiority in population,

and when we're dealing with waste material we must remember what an advantage that is."

"And in any case you're more thrifty in the Highlands. I remember what you said about Aberdeen."

Under the softening influence of being addressed as Ben Nevis by the Permanent Secretary, the eagle's beak had lightened to its normal crimson. It now went back to amaranth.

"I wish you people in Whitehall could understand that Aberdeen has nothing whatever to do with the Highlands, and that jokes about Aberdeen do not apply to the Highlands. If we had the chance of any material to waste, there would be more waste material in the Highlands than anywhere in the world. However, I am getting away from the point. What do you think of my suggestion, Sir Claud?"

"I will certainly consider it most carefully and bear it in mind, . . . Ben Nevis."

"Couldn't you send somebody up to see for himself the state of affairs in Argyll?" the Regional Controller pressed. "I'm going back to-night by the 7.20 from King's Cross. Couldn't you send one of your best men with me? I'll put him up for the week-end at Glenbogle, and he can make a report to you."

"But what exactly do you want us to do, . . . Ben Nevis?"

"The principal thing is to remove Argyll from the region administered by Lord Peebles so that Drumtucket is prevented from interfering with Kilwhillie's admirable organisation for gathering waste in Mull, Ardgour, Morvern and Ardnamurchan."

"But the people of Oban . . ."

"The people of Oban require a lesson," Ben Nevis declared heatedly. "And a very sharp lesson too. They have to be taught that though they may justly claim to be a Highland city they are not the only Highland city, and are in point of fact of less importance than Fort Wil-

liam, not to mention Inverness, which has always been recognised as the capital of the Highlands. If I am prepared to grant that position to Inverness you'll admit it's hardly reasonable for the Argyll lairds to contest it."

"Of course, we are not as familiar at the Ministry as you with the niceties of local rivalries."

"That is why I consider it is imperative you should send one of your best men up to Glenbogle in order that he may satisfy himself about the realities of the situation."

"You would be prepared to abide by his report, . . . Ben Nevis?"

"If it is in favour of our contention, most certainly."

"But if it is not?"

"It *will* be if you send a really good man."

Thus it was that about an hour after Huffam returned from lunch and while he was engaged in drawing up a speech for his Chief to deliver at a great Rag and Bone Rally in the Albert Hall on the fifth of November, the first of a series of rallies which would be addressed by Mr. Apsley Howe throughout the country, the Permanent Secretary rang through to ask if he would come along to his room.

Sir Claud's eyebrows were looking a little dishevelled after his tussle with the Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands, but otherwise he was his imperturbable self.

"Ah, Huffam! I've just been talking to the Minister, and he has very kindly agreed to allow you to undertake a mission of some delicacy in the Highlands on behalf of the Ministry." Sir Claud went on to explain the position of affairs. "I do not want you to commit us to anything definite. The whole problem will have to be very carefully considered from every angle and the necessary adjustments will require bearing in mind before we reach a final decision."

"Quite, quite."

"I mean to say we do not want to jump out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"That would indeed be unfortunate, Sir Claud."

"Most unfortunate," the Permanent Secretary agreed. "I hope this proposed expedition to the Far North will not interfere with any private arrangements of yours for the week-end? You know how much I dislike letting the business of the week drag on into the week-end. I always say that the strength of our Civil Service is its ability to take the fullest advantage of the week-end. I've often thought it was our refusal to let our week-ends be interfered with that went far to winning the war. If the Germans had insisted on their week-end they might have lasted another year in my opinion."

"I have nothing in view for this week-end, Sir Claud. The Minister is going down to High Fettle to-morrow morning, but I take it he will come back on Monday afternoon."

"I have gone into that question with him. If you can get back by Tuesday morning he feels he can carry on with Upwey until then. By the bye, he spoke very highly of your services. He says you're always so willing to put your hand to anything."

"Thank you, Sir Claud."

"But don't overdo that willingness, Huffam. After all, a Minister is a comparatively ephemeral creature, and we don't want him to suppose that he is *too* important."

"I appreciate that," said Huffam, his pale face touched with the faintest pink of gratification. So he had not lost the Permanent Secretary's favour by that impulsive action yesterday in sending Miss Quekett to the British Museum.

"When you've gone into the matter with . . . oh, by the way, Mr. MacDonald likes to be addressed as Ben Nevis."

"I don't quite understand, Sir Claud."

"You call him Ben Nevis when speaking to him."

"Really?"

"I couldn't believe it myself at first, but he was quite

annoyed with me for calling him Mr. MacDonald. So I thought I'd warn you."

"But wouldn't he think it rather odd if I suddenly started calling him Ben Nevis? A man doesn't always like a younger man to call him by his nickname."

"It's not a nickname, Huffam. It's apparently a Highland habit to call people by their address."

"As if I were to call you Hamilton Terrace or you were to call me Chillingham Gardens."

Sir Claud Huntbath laughed at this little joke, and Huffam at last felt as happy as he used to feel before his Chief gave that broadcast.

"But what I was going to say," Sir Claud went on, "was that after you have gone into the matter at Glenbogle you should make a point of seeing Lord Peebles on Monday and ascertaining what his reaction is likely to be to placing the whole of Argyll in the region controlled by Mr. MacDonald . . . by Ben Nevis. Better get into the habit of thinking of him as Ben Nevis. You'll find it difficult to address him as Ben Nevis otherwise. I found it sticking in my throat every time. Well, if you're going to catch the 7.20 at King's Cross you'll want to get away from the Ministry in good time. You'd better book a sleeper at once. I'll send word to Mr . . . to Ben Nevis that you'll meet him at the train and explain who you are."

At this moment Sir Claud Huntbath's private secretary came into the room to ask if he could take a personal call."

"From whom?"

"Well, I cannot quite make out, sir, but it seems to be a foreigner."

"Can't you find out what he wants?"

"It seems to be a personal matter for you, Sir Claud. I think if you could spare a moment . . ."

The Permanent Secretary picked up the receiver a little irritably.

"Yes, this is Sir Claud Huntbath speaking . . . Sir Claud Huntbath himself . . . I don't understand . . . Huntbath . . .

this *is* Sir Claud Huntbath speaking from the Ministry of Waste . . . certainly I'm not on any pavement . . . not Havebath, Huntbath . . . H-U-N-T-Hunt . . . take me away? What do you mean, take me away . . . who are you? . . . Gustave? . . . that doesn't tell me anything . . . I've never been near your restaurant . . . you've made a mistake . . ."

Sir Claud hung up the receiver.

"I don't know what the man wants, but he certainly doesn't want me. Surely you could have explained to him that he'd made a mistake without involving me with an incoherent foreigner at the other end of the telephone," he said rather sharply to his private secretary. The latter apologised and withdrew.

"We seem to be infested with lunatics at the Ministry these days," Sir Claud observed to Huffam. "Which reminds me, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities sent a note to say that the woman who plagued us all yesterday has been released and that no further action is to be taken. Here is her name and her address. A note had better be kept of it in case she sends or brings other waste material here."

The Permanent Secretary pushed across the note to Huffam, who read with something akin to horror that Miss Angela Quekett lived at Sans Souci, Oaks Road, Hodford. What a risk he had taken by that impulsive step of sending the bath and stove to Mr. Robert Glegg, and what a mercy Glegg had not known of Miss Quekett's adventure! He might have sent *her* back with the bath and the stove, and what might she not have added to the already embarrassing load!

"You're looking worried, Huffam," said Sir Claud. "You're sure this mission into the Highlands isn't breaking into your week-end?"

"No, really, Sir Claud. I was just thinking what was to be done before I leave this evening. I think I'll get along if I may."

"Yes, yes, I'll tell Ben Nevis that you'll meet him at the train. He's a big hook-nosed fellow with grizzled hair and a very brown tweed suit."

When Huffam was back in his room he would, did people ever perform such prodigies of seborrhea outside the pages of books, have broken out in a cold sweat at the thought of what might have happened if the Permanent Secretary had been a little less impatient and taken the trouble to discover what Gustave really wanted.

An accident about a bath and a stove on the pavement outside a Soho restaurant on top of the incident at the British Museum yesterday might have seriously shaken Sir Claud's confidence in him. No doubt the Minister would have explained that he was acting on his behalf, but that would not have mollified the Permanent Secretary, who would have felt, and rightly, that it was his duty if he was acting on the Minister's behalf to act with the caution which should be an outstanding characteristic of the perfect Civil Servant. However, fortune had been kind. Sir Claud had not realised that he was being confused with a six-foot bath the bottom of which was holed, the inside scabrously inscribed. Nevertheless, it was tempting providence to leave the bath outside the Petite Sardine a moment longer than could be avoided. He had been foolish to leave it so long. Gustave, maddened by the sight of it, might hire a lorry and bring it to the Ministry of Waste himself. And if in spite of the efforts of Pond and Perkins he should succeed in leaving it in the courtyard, what would be the effect on the Minister of once more beholding it? The little man had already had a bad morning with the dentist. Suppose, coming from the House, he should be greeted by that bath, itself like some huge hideous caricature of a decayed tooth? He might easily forget that more honourable Bath at which he had hinted.

Lorry. Perkins. These two words detached themselves from his whirling thoughts and waltzed together

into a plan. He rang down to ask if the Assistant Janitor would come up to his room.

"Sergeant Perkins, I have to go North to-night on business for the Ministry."

"Very good, sir."

"You remember the incident of Miss Quekett yesterday?"

"The woman with the . . . ?"

"Exactly," Huffam broke in.

"I'm not likely to forget *her* in a hurry, sir."

"We do not want that type of woman haunting the Ministry."

"Certainly not, sir. The proper place for women like that is Colney Hatch."

"Apparently after her escapade in the British Museum she is again at large. She lives at Hodford."

"Does she, sir?"

"I had intended to convey a bath and a stove to Hodford this evening, but of course as Miss Quekett lives there I cannot do so. Moreover, I have to go to Scotland, so that in any case I could not have conveyed this bath and stove to Hodford."

"No, sir, you certainly couldn't do both."

"I was going to ask you to convey the bath and stove to Hodford for me, or rather for the Minister, who wishes them put out of the way somewhere. Obviously Hodford is now ruled out for the bath and stove."

"Yes, sir."

"And it occurred to me just now, Sergeant, that as your sister is married to Inspector Barclay . . ."

"Excuse me, he's a sergeant, sir. Same as me, except of course he's only in the police."

"Sergeant Barclay of the Tottenden police."

"That's right, sir."

"Well, it occurred to me that possibly after consultation with your brother-in-law he might be able to indicate

a suitable place at Tottenden where this bath and stove might be . . . might be . . .”

“Dumped, sir?”

“That’s the word. Dumped. Yesterday evening I met your brother-in-law in connection with this very stove, and he would have seen the bath on top of the station-omnibus in which I conveyed a certain amount of waste material left at the Minister’s house in Eaton Square.”

“After his broadcast?”

“Exactly, Sergeant. Well, owing to a slight misunderstanding due to the stove’s falling off the omnibus in Tottenden High Street, both it and the bath are now back in London.”

“I see, sir. And what exactly is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to take the necessary steps by hiring a lorry or whatever form of conveyance you decide upon as most suitable to remove this bath and stove to Tottenden and enlist the help of Sergeant Barclay.”

“I see, sir. And where is the stove and bath now?”

“At the moment they are on the pavement outside the Petite Sardine Restaurant in Greek Street, Soho.”

“Sardine Restarong? Of course! Now I’m getting to it. We had a fellow in a motor-van about half-past one talking about a bath and a stove, and of course he mentioned your name. I spoke a bit sharp to him. You know, sir, after that business yesterday morning I felt a bit worried by anything like that.”

“It’s quite intelligible. However, I think we ought to be able to get rid of those things now.”

“I’m sure we can, sir,” said Sergeant Perkins cheerfully. “I’m only sorry I didn’t mention to you about this van coming in Sergeant-Major Pond’s luncheon-hour. But I really thought somebody was having a game with me.”

“You’d better ring through to the Petite Sardine Restaurant and let them know you will be calling for them round about six.”

"I could go right away, sir. I only wish I could get hold of that fellow who drove that load of scrap iron in here yesterday afternoon. I'd drown him in the bath halfway. He *did* get my dander up. You know, sir. He was one of those fellows full of back-answers."

"No, I don't think you'd better go before six. It might dislocate Sergeant-Major Pond's arrangements. And there's no reason to involve him in this business."

"Well, there's something in that, sir."

"But you'd better ring up the restaurant and tell them you'll be coming along because it wouldn't do for them to anticipate appropriate action on our part by sending the bath and stove to the Ministry. A bath is a very awkward thing to get rid of in a moment. By the way, you'll make out a bill for your expenses. Perhaps I'd better let you have a couple of pounds to carry on with. I will reclaim from the Finance Department whatever you have to expend."

"And if this brother-in-law of mine gets nosey about the bath and stove—and he is a bit nosey—what do I tell him, sir?"

"You can tell him in confidence that these were premature contributions to the nation-wide drive against waste."

"Very well, sir," said Sergeant Perkins. There was a touch of disappointment in his tone, for he had rather been looking forward to mystifying Sergeant Barclay. "You leave it all to me, sir."

"I leave it all to you, Sergeant, with complete confidence," said Huffam.

The Assistant Janitor saluted and retired.

"Got to make a 'phone call for Mr. Huffam," he told Sergeant-Major Pond.

"Humph! It took Mr. Huffam a long time to tell you what he wanted," the Janitor grumbled. "I've just had a deputation here of scrap iron dealers from South Wales and I wanted you to take them along to the Chief Con-

troller's room. I had to send one of the boys with 'em."

"Taffies?" repeated the Assistant Janitor. "Don't you worry yourself. They'll find their way, boys or no boys."

He went into the telephone-box and established communication between the Ministry of Waste and the Petite Sardine.

The passer-by who had caught a glimpse of Sergeant Perkins, V.C., through the glass-door of the illuminated telephone-box might have been excused for supposing that he was being asphyxiated in a lethal chamber, so dusky was the hue of his cheeks, so far protruded were his eyes, such seeming constriction was there of his brawny neck. And the passer-by would have been relieved to observe that when after a minute or two of obviously intense agony Sergeant Perkins got his mouth to the receiver he seemed to draw from it life-giving air, so different was his expression when talking instead of listening.

"What do you mean you've got a bang and a pole? If you mean you've got a bath and a stove, why don't you call them by their proper names? . . . I can't help your troubles . . . well, by what I hear the bath's got a hole in it, so what does it matter if the kids do? . . . it'll be called for round about six . . . oh, you'll send them here, will you? . . . try it, try it, that's all I ask, try it . . . nobody's going to take in any bath or stove here . . . steady now, steady, this is a Government Office, don't forget . . . ah, I'm glad to hear it . . . think yourself lucky after what you called me on the 'phone that I don't put the Postmaster-General on your tracks . . . you ought to be ashamed of yourself . . . what have you been doing, swallowing your own mustard-pots? . . . round about six, and think yourself lucky after what you called me that I'm coming then . . . now then, no more of it, or I won't come at all . . . na pool! . . . got that? . . . ever serve curry in your

restarong? . . . curry I said . . . well, fry yourself and then you will know . . . I'll see you round about six, but keep away from lighted matches or nobody'll ever see you again."

"I wonder why foreigners always get so excited," Sergeant Perkins observed to Sergeant-Major Pond when he emerged from the telephone-box.

"Because they're foreigners, I suppose," the Janitor replied.

"Yes, I suppose that is the reason," the Assistant Janitor agreed. "Suit you if I go off at a quarter to six to-night, Sergeant-Major?"

"What for?"

"Mr. Huffam gave me a job of work to do for him, but he said to consult you first about going off."

"It isn't like Mr. Huffam to suggest anything so irregular."

"Well, he has to go up to Scotland to-night."

"All right, I'll manage," said the Janitor.

Sergeant Perkins, V.C., whistled to himself a phrase from a gay air.

"This isn't the Palladium, you know," Sergeant-Major Pond observed severely.

Chapter Thirteen

SUSPICIONS

WHEN Huffam arrived home in a taxi (his mission was held to begin from the time he left the Ministry and was therefore chargeable to the taxpayer) he found Gertrude still inclined to be demonstratively penitent for allowing her suspicions to come back at the sight of the bath and the stove on the pavement outside the Petite Sardine. She had already paid for them by an attack of indigestion during which the ghosts of radishes and red and green peppers had returned to haunt her almost continuously throughout the afternoon. Huffam discouraged her demonstrative penitence because he did not like demonstrativeness in any form about anything, and he liked it even less when it was strongly permeated by soda mint.

"All right, dear," he said, disengaging himself, "don't let's say any more about it. I knew you'd soon see how foolish you were being. And now I have to pack. I must catch the 7.20 at King's Cross."

"You're going away, Olly?" she asked anxiously.

"Only for the week-end. I expect to be back in London on Tuesday morning."

"Where are you going, Olly?"

"It's not like you, dear, to ask questions about my official work."

"I'm sorry. I'll tell Mabel to get your suitcase ready."

"However, I don't think there's any harm in my telling you that I shall be spending to-morrow and Sunday with Ben Nevis."

"Ought I to know Mr. Nevis, Olly? I don't remember the name."

"No, dear, not a gentleman called Benjamin Nevis, but Ben Nevis the mountain."

"The highest mountain in Great Britain and Ireland?"

Gertrude had been well educated.

"Exactly, dear."

"You will be careful, won't you, Olly?"

"Careful?"

"I mean not to look over the edge or fall over precipices and things."

"I don't think we shall have much time for climbing, Gertrude. I shall be there on official business."

When Huffam mentioned official business in the intimacy of the domestic circle it was Gertrude's custom to assume the grave expression of a vicar's wife telling a parishioner that her husband is in church and therefore at the moment unapproachable. Eve no doubt assumed this expression when her husband was walking with their Maker in the Garden of Eden, even though at the time there was no other woman to be impressed.

Huffam's packing was carried out with the help of Mabel and Gertrude with as much solemnity as if he were off to take up a proconsular appointment somewhere East of Suez, and at half-past six he left Chillingham Gardens for King's Cross to meet or, in the richer English of the Civil Service, to establish contact with MacDonald of Ben Nevis somewhere on the platform whence departs the famous train known as *The Nightflying Scotsman*. The process of establishing contact was easy. It would have been as impossible to mistake Primrose Hill for Ben Nevis itself as the laird of it from any of the other travellers by that train.

"We'll dine together when we start," said the Chief-tain.

"By all means . . ." it had to be done sooner or later, so why not now? . . . "by all means, . . . Ben Nevis."

Huffam was immensely relieved to find that his host showed no sign of surprise. Not that he had suspected Sir Claud Huntbath of playing a joke upon him, but he had been a little worried lest the Permanent Secretary

might have made a mistake. His last doubt was dispelled when he heard the sleeping-car attendant say, "Good-evening, Ben Nevis, what time shall I call you in the morning, sir?"

"Mr. Huffam and I will breakfast after we leave Tyndrum."

"Very good, Ben Nevis. I'll call you with tea half an hour earlier."

But we must quit the Chieftain and the Permanent Official until they reach Glenbogle Castle and return to 9 Chillingham Gardens, arriving at the same moment as a carrier's van.

"Something has come for the master, madam," Mabel informed Mrs. Huffam, who was tidying herself up in her room before coming down to dinner punctually at half-past seven."

"What is it, Mabel?"

"It's a pram, madam."

"A what?"

"A prambulator, madam."

"A perambulator for the master? There must be some mistake."

"It's addressed to him and the carriage was paid."

"Oh, it must be a mistake. How did it come?"

"It came in a van, madam."

"Well, go down and tell the driver he must have made a mistake."

"He's already gone, madam. He pulled the prambulator up into the hall."

"You mean it's in the hall now?"

"Yes, madam."

"But where did it come from? Didn't you ask?"

"No, madam, but there's a label tied to the handle which says it's a present from a Mr. Ben Nevis."

"I'll come downstairs and go into the matter," said Gertrude, outwardly calm, but inwardly a prey to violent emotion flavoured with the radishes and peppers of the

hors d'œuvres at lunch whose ghosts in this moment of despair had returned to haunt her more persistently than ever.

Down in the hall Gertrude read on one side of a label tied to the perambulator:

Mr. Oliver Huffam,
9 Chillingham Gardens,
S.W.7.

*A Present from Ben Nevis in exchange
for your bath and stove.*

Then as with nerveless fingers she toyed with this horrible label she read upon the other side of it in a sloping feminine handwriting:

*From Rover who barks his hope that every patriotic
dog will follow his example. The perambulator
is an offering from a grateful mother whose tots
are tots no longer but fine young men ready to serve
King and Country when the call comes.*

Tots no longer! This must have started before Olly ever proposed to her. All these years of their married life he must have been maintaining this woman whose name she did not know, but who apparently, at any rate now, was living at the foot of Ben Nevis. And now he was on the way to her with a bath and a stove. Evidently they had been brought to the Petite Sardine instead of being sent to King's Cross. And Olly had taken cover behind official business—behind those two words which had been kept sacred and inviolate ever since they were married. This woman must have moved up to Scotland now that her tots—his tots as well as her tots!—were tots no longer. That would account for his trying to send her the bath and stove. Her first instinct had been right. He *was* furnishing a home for another woman. It was much worse, however, than the worst she had imagined. This was not the first home he had furnished for this creature. Somewhere all these years he had been keeping her and

their tots within reach. But why had she sent him this perambulator? There was only one explanation. She must suppose him to be a bachelor, for obviously she had fancied he would be pleased to receive this souvenir of the days when it had been the conveyance of their two tots. Two tots? There might have been three or four of them. And she was grateful for them, grateful to the man who had kept her as his mistress for at least twenty years. Olly! That Olly could be such a hypocrite! And who was Rover? And what was the example that every patriotic dog was to follow? Gertrude shook her head helplessly. She would have to know a great deal more about this dark double life Olly had been leading before she could expect to probe that mystery. For a moment the unhappy wife thought of following her husband up to Scotland and confronting him with the woman of whose comfort he was so solicitous, that he was travelling all the way to Ben Nevis with a bath and a stove for her. But how was she to be sure of finding him? Should she arrive at whatever station one did arrive at for Ben Nevis, for whom was she to enquire? It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack to look for Olly on Ben Nevis.

No, she must do nothing impulsive. She must wait until he returned from what she felt to call official business was nothing short of blasphemy.

At that moment Joan came out of the room at the end of the hall.

"Mother," she said, "Nigel and I were wondering if you would like us to sit with you while you have your dinner, as Father is away. If we can't finish our homework for Monday to-night, we can do what's left to-morrow morning. Hullo, what's this?"

"It's a perambulator, dear."

"But why has a perambulator come here?"

"It's been left here by mistake." Gertrude steeled herself for what she must consider in the circumstances a white lie. "Evidently something that was intended for

your father has gone where this perambulator was supposed to go. We can do nothing till Father gets back——”

“Isn’t it funny, Mother?”

“Very funny, dear,” Gertrude replied in a melancholy voice.

“Well, shall Nigel and I postpone some of our homework and sit with you while you’re having your dinner?” Joan asked.

“Yes, dear, that will be very nice.”

“Nigel!” his sister called. “Mother says we can sit with her.”

“All right,” the studious boy called back from the room at the end of the hall, “I’m just finishing my Thucydides construe.”

One of Huffam’s most cherished rules was that Nigel and Joan should finish off their homework for the weekend on Friday evening, so that they might preserve the Saturday whole holiday for healthy sport and games and innocent amusement. That his wife should consent to break this rule was a sign of her disillusionment.

“Bring me a pair of scissors, dear,” she told Joan, and when they were brought she clipped the string of the label tied to the handle of the perambulator and put it in a black velvet bag, in which she carried the materials for powdering her nose, still with a faint sense of raffish guilt from the tremendous date in the mid-twenties when she had surrendered to modernity.

“A prambulator?” Cook was saying in the kitchen. “It must have been a mistake, Mabel.”

“It wasn’t a mistake, Cook. You mark my words. He’s been a bit more gay than what we think.”

“Well, of course, they always say you can’t trust the quiet ones.”

When Mabel went down again with the almost untouched fish and was taking delivery from Cook of some mince, she said:

"She's cut off that label."

"About the tots?"

"That's right."

Cook shook her head.

"You mark my words, Cook," Mabel continued, "She doesn't think it's a mistake. Look at the way She's hardly pecked at this lovely bit of plaice. It's my belief that whoever she was she's gone off with this Ben Nevis, and Ben's done this to spite Him. Men are like that. They hate the idea of anybody else having been there before them."

"You take up the mince, Mabel," said Cook severely. "You don't know so much about men as what you think. Or if you do you oughtn't to. You'll be saying next He was chasing you."

Mabel went off with the mince, giggling.

"I don't think I'll have anything more, Mabel," her mistress told her when she reached the dining-room.

"Mother!" Joan protested. "You've eaten nothing."

"I had rather an indigestible lunch, dear."

"Where did you lunch?"

"At the Petite Sardine in Soho."

No incident had marked the removal of the bath and stove from that restaurant an hour and a quarter ago. To all M. Gustave's protests Sergeant Perkins had replied by the gesture which expresses the process known as 'washing out.'

Against this manifestation of English phlegm the Frenchman's rage spent itself.

Sergeant Perkins would have preferred to keep on his uniform for the visit to his brother-in-law Sergeant Barclay. Alf Barclay had a high opinion of his own importance and Henry Perkins knew the value of those ribbons of his when dealing with Alf. He decided that, however much his own dignity might be served, the dignity of His Majesty's Ministry of Waste would not be served by riding in the cab of a lorry with a bath and a stove to

Tottenden, and so with a nice propriety he had changed into mufti. He had considered taking the lorry to his sister's house in Sheep Street, but he had decided to call at the police-station first and find out if Alf was on duty that evening. He did not want Alf to think that he was ashamed of the bath and stove.

"Is Sergeant Barclay on duty this evening?" he enquired of a constable at the police-station.

"Who wants him?"

"I want him."

"What for?"

Whatever the resources of Sergeant Perkins' phlegm might be when he was faced by an outraged Frenchman, he had none to spare for youthful coppers.

"That's my business, isn't it?" he replied to this particular specimen whose fair fluffy moustache filled him with scorn.

"Who shall I tell him wants him?"

"Tell him Sergeant Perkins wants him."

The youthful copper saluted in case this visitor should be a sergeant of his own force in mufti, and went off to obey.

Sergeant Barclay appeared on the scene.

"Why, Harry!"

"Harry it is, Alf."

"Did Lil send you round to see me?"

"I haven't seen Lil yet. It's you I want."

"You'd better come in."

Sergeant Perkins followed his brother-in-law into a room behind the outer office.

"It's about that stove dropped on your beat last night."

"I've got past the days when I had a beat, Harry, but there *was* a stove dropped in Tottenden High Street about this time last night, yes," Sergeant Barclay allowed.

"Well, why didn't you keep it in Tottenden?" his brother-in-law asked.

"Have you come here on behalf of a Mr. Huffam?"

"I've come here on behalf of the Ministry of Waste," the Assistant Janitor replied with an impressiveness that he flattered himself Alf would find it hard to beat. "I'm glad to hear from Mr. Huffam that on the whole you treated him fairly civil, Alf, and we're not lodging a complaint at the Ministry against the Tottenden police. All the same, it's considered you ought to have shown yourself a bit more helpful."

Sergeant Perkins noted with satisfaction that the expression on his brother-in-law's large face indicated he was already on the defensive.

"I mean to say, when Mr. Huffam told you who he was you ought to have asked what you could do to help instead of laying off about obstructions in a public thoroughfare."

"I let him use the station telephone," said the police officer.

"I dare say you did, but through you not being more helpful last night the Ministry have had to send me all the way out to Tottenden with this very same stove, and a bath as well."

"What for, Harry?"

"Because said stove and bath have to be deposited. I suppose you've got a rubbish dump in Tottenden, outside the place itself?"

"There's a public dump, yes."

"Well, will you tell one of your Little Boy Blues to show my lorry-driver where he can unload?"

"But what's the Ministry of Waste want to dump stuff at Tottenden for?"

"How long have you been in the police force, Alf?"

"Before you were in the army, Harry."

"Well, then you ought to know by now not to ask why a Government office does this or that. You don't ask why when an inspector tells you to do something. If I'm told to dump a bath and a stove at Tottenden I don't ask why either. I just do it."

"Well, of course, that's quite right, Harry. Still, it's a natural question to ask."

"Did you hear Mr. Apsley Howe speaking on the wireless last Wednesday?"

"Lil heard him."

"Didn't Lil hear what he said about waste?"

"She said he spoke a lot about waste. In fact she was on at me to clear out the shed at the back."

"I never looked in on you and Lil without she was on at you about clearing out that shed. Well, if you'll send along somebody with my driver we'll get rid of this bath and stove and then I'll look in and see Lil in Sheep Street."

Sergeant Barclay summoned a constable and gave him his orders.

"Nothing except this bath and stove?"

"That's all at present, but with this big drive starting against waste I don't know what you mightn't be getting."

"It's putting a lot on the police," Sergeant Barclay grumbled.

"Ah, I thought it wouldn't be long before we heard that," said his brother-in-law scornfully. "What about me having to drive all this way out to Tottenden after all day on duty at the Ministry just because you hadn't the gumption to do of your own accord what I'm telling you to do now?"

"You'll get a good glass of beer from Lil."

"How long before you're off duty?"

"Me? I'll be here till ten o'clock, being only in the police and consequently having nothing to do," said Sergeant Barclay sarcastically.

While Sergeant Henry Perkins was enjoying in his sister's parlour the good glass of beer he had been promised by his brother-in-law after the lorry-driver, who was also enjoying a good glass of beer, had satisfied him that his mission was accomplished and that the bath and stove now lay with miscellaneous rubbish on a piece of wasteground by Tottenden Rise about a mile along the

Hodford Road, in Hodford itself Mr. Robert Glegg was putting the last touches to the disguise in which he planned to spend the week-end investigating the mystery of 189 Eaton Square.

The amateur detective was in his den at Ben Nevis, Oaks Road. He had felt justified in leaving to a subordinate the charge of the Paper Works on Saturday morning, for he was anxious to be away from Hodford that Friday night when none of the local busybodies would observe he was disguised. He did not want Mrs. Chicksands at Lilac Villa to spy upon his departure. He did not want to attract the attention of that long-eared blowhard Burge, who had been boosting his own self-importance by persuading a lot of people with nothing better to do to collect scrap iron and send it to the House of Commons (of all places!), or with that long-tongued lorry-hirer, Tom Needler.

It may be wondered why, in view of the fact that Mr. Robert Glegg was entirely unknown to any of the inmates of 189 Eaton Square, he should have thought it worth while to disguise himself; but an amateur detective feels more like one of the professionals he scorns if he can disguise himself, and in any case the disguise added to the pleasure of the investigation.

Mr. Glegg had guarded against interruption by sending Mrs. Pinches and Gladys to the films, and as soon as they had left Ben Nevis he had set about the task of transforming himself from Robert Glegg, the manager of the Hodford Paper Works, into the personality for whose appearance he had prepared a year ago by having visiting-cards printed for him. It had been a temptation to assume for this second self a more romantic name than Robert Glegg; but Mr. Glegg was nothing if not thorough, and he had resolutely chosen the inconspicuous name of Henry Smith to whom he had accorded the occupation of Sanitary Expert, rejecting both Sanitary Inspector and Sanitary Engineer as suggestive of practice rather than theory,

and therefore liable to involve him in awkward questions which as a mere Expert he could dismiss with a tolerant smile for the ignorance of those who asked them.

How gratified he was to-night by his choice of an occupation when he looked at one of the cards of his second self!

MR. HENRY SMITH

*Sanitary Expert,
Consultations by Appointment.*

If he had known that his first investigation was going to be connected with a bath he could not have chosen his alleged calling more artfully.

It may be superfluous to state that Mr. Glegg had long ago rejected all conventional disguises. He had, it is true, practised a certain amount with heavy false moustaches, and even with beards, but he had appreciated the danger of extra hair to which he was unaccustomed when in relighting a cigarette once he had misjudged the amount of it left and set fire to a particularly luxuriant moustache. Nor was he inclined to play any tricks with glasses, for being short-sighted he was dependent on his own pince-nez. The utmost he was prepared to allow Mr. Henry Smith the Sanitary Expert were spectacles, and even these were not the horn-rimmed ones which had been the stock-in-trade of disguises ever since they first crossed the Atlantic. Wigs, hair-dye, walnut juice, artificial scars, false noses, all such deceptive trumpery he did not consider.

Mr. Glegg knew from his reading that man betrays himself quickest of all by his walk and his figure. Therefore by building up the inside of one boot with blotting-paper he gave himself a limp and by building up his back with a cushion he gave himself a hump. Neither of these

minor deformities ought to incommode him in his Baby Austin. And to compensate for any discomfort they might cause he discarded the stiff collar he habitually wore and put on instead a grey flannel shirt with a turn-down collar which had been left behind the previous summer by a friend who was hiking along the road that Dick Turpin took to York. This he wore with a blue serge suit, a dark-grey Chesterfield overcoat, and a bowler-hat. When he had put on the Chesterfield it seemed to him that the effect of the hump was rather lost, and he substituted for the original cushion he had used a larger one. At the last moment, in spite of his unfortunate experience in the past with a heavy false moustache, he could not resist attaching to his face a pair of black whiskers which gave him the look of a matador who had retired from the bull-ring on account of failing eyesight.

"But," as he asked of his reflection in the glass of the mantelpiece, "who would recognise me now?"

He left on the table of the den a note for Mrs. Pinches to say that he had been called away to an important business conference in London and might not be back until Sunday evening. Then he carried his suitcase out to the garage and jiggered about with his Baby Austin in the way that motorists do. With the prospect of the adventure before him Mr. Glegg felt a pang for the trusty motor-bicycle which was being left behind in favour of the Baby Austin.

"Never mind, old hoss," he said sentimentally, "your turn next time. Cheerio!"

Then he got into the Austin, which he found more cramped even than usual owing to the size of the hump he had assumed. His built-up boot, too, made him clumsy with the clutch, and he told himself he should have to be careful not to get into trouble between the brake and the accelerator. Altogether he felt in his Baby Austin that evening some of the symptoms of discomfort that must affect the lobster which is outgrowing its shell.

However, he was off at last, and thought with pleasure as the car bounced along Oaks Road of the skill with which he had eluded the sharp eyes of Mrs. Chicksands and the long ears of that blowhard Burge.

As he passed Sans Souci he saw by the light of the street-lamp that Miss Quekett was apparently gardening. What on earth was that woman doing gardening at eight o'clock of a damp night at the end of October? She grew more eccentric every day, he reflected. Little did he guess quite how eccentric she had grown since, inspired by Mr. Apsley Howe's broadcast and hearing what Mr. Burge and Mrs. Chicksands and others were preparing to do next day in the way of response to his nation-wide appeal, she had made her own contribution to the crusade against waste.

The amateur detective soon forgot about Miss Quekett in the double distraction of steering the Austin and pondering over the mystery of the bath.

"It's not murder. Murder can be ruled out of it," he said to himself. "No motive has been found, no opportunity has been established, and finally nobody so far as we know has been murdered. But there is a mystery about that bath, and what that mystery is I will find out. Has Huffam come into possession of some guilty secret in the past of a Cabinet Minister? Is it blackmail?" Or was the bath by chance used for some experiment connected with rearmament, and was it essential that it should be removed from the possibility of being tampered with by spies? Or was that long red haired fellow himself a spy selling his country's secrets to a foreign power? And had he deliberately left the bath in Nobbs' Bottom for it to be removed by the agents of a foreign power? It was idle to speculate without more data, and those data he could acquire by knowing more about what went on at 189 Eaton Square. Obviously the bath must be dangerous to Huffam, or he would not have tried to get rid of it by sending it to Ben Nevis. How he must have cursed when it came back to him like that! What luck that he should

have picked on Caffyn's van to take it! Evidently the stove was in some way bound up with the bath. Where were the bath and the stove now? They might be at 189 Eaton Square, or they might be at 9 Chillingham Gardens. To-morrow's investigations ought to clear up that point.

Had Mr. Glegg but known he could have settled the question of the whereabouts of the bath and stove then by stopping the Austin and peering over a fence by the road at the rubbish dump of Tottenden Rise. He would have seen the bath palely glimmering in the moonlight and the stove, a degraded object even by moonlight, beside it. But Mr. Glegg pressed the accelerator with his built-up boot and bounced along faster than ever on the way to London.

A couple of hours later, Mr. Apsley Howe returning from the House alighted from a taxi, and as he walked up the steps of 189 Eaton Square observed what he thought at first, with a sinking feeling, was another contribution of waste material beside the pavement. He looked again and saw it was one of those small cars that bounce about in the middle of the road in front of Rolls-Royces. And as he peered at the car a face peered out from the car at him, a whiskered sinister face.

Mr. Apsley Howe hastily put the key into the lock and passed into the shelter of his home.

"There's a queer-looking fellow waiting outside in a small car, William," he said to the footman. "You'd better go and see what he wants."

"Very good, sir."

A moment later William came back.

"The car you saw has just driven off, sir, in the direction of the Buckingham Palace Road."

"You didn't see the fellow inside?"

"No, sir."

"I'm going down to High Fettle by the 10.25. Pack my things in the morning."

"Very good, sir. Her Ladyship is not requiring me at High Fettle, sir."

"So she told me. No more rubbish—I mean waste material has been left here?"

"No, sir. But the B.B.C. rang up twice very urgent."

"That's all right. They got me at the House."

And without Huffam to suggest a friendly refusal Mr. Apsley Howe, flattered by the implied tribute to him as a broadcaster, had agreed with Uncle Jumbo to talk on Monday afternoon in the Children's Hour on the theme of 'Now then, nippers, look nippy, and nip up all the waste material you can find.'

Chapter Fourteen

GLENBOGLE CASTLE

OF the many wild glens which have made the scenery of the Highlands famous, none is wilder than Glenbogle and none has blistered the heels and parched the tongues of so many hikers. For eleven miles it gouged its way into the desolate country at the back of Ben Nevis without a crofter's cottage throughout the forbidding length of it, and when after a tramp of four hours along a road for the repair of which not even MacDonald of Ben Nevis could extract the money from the Inverness-shire County Council, the hiker reached the pillars of Glenbogle Castle, surmounted by two stone water-horses mordant, he received instead of the proverbial Highland welcome a notice-board inscribed: GLENBOGLE CASTLE. NO CAMPING. If, cherishing tales of Jacobite romance, the hiker was not daunted by this warning and held on his way up the pine-darkened drive toward the Castle, he would be met by a savage-looking keeper with a hefty cromag and a wall-eyed retriever who would send him back the way he had come.

"I've managed to clear Glenbogle of hikers," Ben Nevis informed his guest that Saturday morning as they drove along the desolate road in a pre-war Daimler which gave the impression that one was travelling in a Victoria boudoir on the back of an elephant.

With similar satisfaction Ben Nevis's grandfather may have announced that he had cleared Glenbogle of his own clansmen.

"You've been troubled with hikers, have you?" Huffam asked.

"We have three pests—bracken, rabbits, and hikers—

and hikers are the worst of the three. We're just passing Loch na Craosnaich."

"You didn't catch cold in the train, I hope?" Huffam enquired solicitously.

His host looked at him like an eagle accused of a vulture's habits.

"Never had a cold in my life. I said this is Loch na Craosnaich. The Loch of the Spear."

Huffam eyed a gloomy stretch of water beside the road.

"So called because in 1482 Hector of the Great Jaw speared eleven Macintoshes beside that loch and then drowned them one after another."

"Did he really? Were the authorities able to do anything about it?"

The Chieftain looked round sharply to see if his guest was trying to be funny. It was clear that he was not, and his beak lightened.

"I've arranged for some of us to meet at lunch in Inverness," he announced presently. "The Zonal Controller for Nairn and Morayshire and the Area Controllers for the Black Isle, Central Inverness, and Easter Ross will all be there, and you'll get some idea of the way we are organising the accumulation of waste. Then I thought we'd look in on the way at the District Controllers in Fort Augustus and Drumnadrochit, and of course Inverness itself, and on the way back we'll see the District Controllers at Foyers and Spean Bridge."

"That should be most instructive," said Huffam.

"Well, I want you to get an insight into the way we are trying to settle what is and is not waste up here before we get down to the root of the matter to-night."

"To-night?"

"Kilwhillie is staying the night with us at Glenbogle, and he will explain the situation which has arisen over Argyll. I'm counting on you, Huffam, to put our case very strongly before the Ministry."

"I have to be strictly neutral, you know," the emissary

from Whitehall reminded him. "I have to see Lord Peebles on Monday. Sir Claud Huntbath has telegraphed asking him to meet me in Glasgow."

"I feel positive you'll be on our side."

"I shall certainly do my best to put your case as you state it," Huffam promised. Then he edged away from a dangerous topic. "This is my first visit to the Highlands. The scenery is really very fine. Of course, I knew it was fine scenery, but it's even finer than I expected."

"Kilwhillie and I will show you some grand country to-morrow when we drive you down to Oban, where I particularly want you to have a talk with MacDonald, the District Controller."

"Oban is in Lord Peebles' Region, isn't it?"

"At present, but we're hoping that after your report to the Ministry it will come into my Region."

"Tell me, Ben Nevis . . ." already Huffam, with his host's foot upon his native heath, was finding it quite easy to address him thus . . . "and forgive me if I'm asking a foolish question, but I'd always understood you were very strict up in the Highlands about the observance of Sunday?"

"So we are."

"And it is not considered breaking the Sabbath to make a journey by car to discuss a matter of business?"

"A matter of business to which financial profit was attached would be out of keeping, but no financial profit is attached to our business. We are performing a patriotic duty."

"I appreciate the difference."

"Mind you, if you had the time at your disposal I should prefer not to drive to Oban on a Sunday, but then you haven't the time. We must take full advantage of what you can spare us."

"I see your point."

"And in any case I'm an Episcopalian myself."

"That's the same as the Church of England, isn't it?"

"More or less, more or less. I have my own chaplain at Glenbogle. He'll arrange to have Morning Service in good time for us to get away. So you won't miss Church."

"Oh, please don't have Church on my account," Huffam begged.

"It's no trouble at all. Not a bit. We always have it on Sunday morning."

Soon after this the car reached the gates of Glenbogle Castle.

"What exactly is that animal?" Huffam asked, pointing to the water-horses mordant upon their pillars.

"These are the water-horses of the MacDonalds of Ben Nevis. We have a legend that Mac 'ic Eachainn, the first MacDonald of Ben Nevis, was chased by two water-horses from dawn till dusk and finally slew them both on what was afterwards the site of Glenbogle Castle with a sword he found stuck in a boulder of granite, after which a fairy woman appeared and promised that all the land within the line he had been chased by the two water-horses should be his and his heirs until the day of the seven whirlwinds. And that is why we are where we are, and have two water-horses for our supporters."

"How very interesting! But what exactly is a water-horse?"

"Well, I suppose you matter-of-fact fellows would say it was a mythical animal."

"On the lines of a unicorn or a griffin?"

"Just so. However, since the Loch Ness Monster, we can't afford to be quite so matter-of-fact."

"You believe in the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Of course I believe in it."

"Have you seen it yourself?"

"No, but Kilwhillie has. He'll tell you all about it."

Glenbogle Castle was the kind of castle that would have delighted the heart of Sir Walter Scott, but Huffam was hardly aware of its size against what seemed the mountainous wife of his host. How could he address such a

woman as Mrs. Ben Nevis without feeling that he was being personal? His relief was intense when Ben Nevis himself solved the horrid problem by alluding to her as Mrs. MacDonald. Any sense of inconsistency vanished in her consistency.

"Welcome to Glenbogle, Mr. . . ."

"Huffam, Trixie, Huffam."

"I don't believe I ever heard that name before," Mrs. MacDonald boomed in a contralto that would have made Dame Clara Butt's voice a mere flautino.

"It's not a common name," Huffam agreed, only too happy that it was his name under discussion and not hers.

"My daughters Catriona and Mary, Mr. Huffam."

Two young women who promised to rival their mother's size in due course greeted the guest.

"My boys are all away," said Ben Nevis. "The eldest is with his regiment in India, the second is at sea, and the youngest went back to Cambridge about a fortnight ago. Well, I think I'll go and get into some civilised clothes."

Huffam was shown up to his room, which had a huge mahogany four-poster and a wallpaper covered with life-size flamingos whose roseate plumes had been turned by the mists of Glenbogle into a particularly displeasing shade of washed-out magenta.

When he descended to the great hall, the walls of which were hung with Lochaber axes, targes, muskets, stags' heads and the portraits of kilted chieftains, he found the present representative of the line in a kilt.

"Can't stand these London clothes," Ben Nevis growled.

It had not struck Huffam that the brown tweed suit of Ben Nevis had been particularly characteristic of urban sophistication, and anxious not to suggest to his host that he was staring at him, he stared instead at the head of a large stag over one of the doors.

"As this is your first visit to the North I don't suppose you've done any stalking?" said Ben Nevis.

"No, but I still play golf," Huffam replied.

"Golf, eh? Well, we might have managed a game if I hadn't got those fellows to meet you in Inverness."

"Oh, please," Huffam protested. "I know we have a long afternoon before us."

"Mr. Huffam is at the Ministry of Waste, Trixie, and I've got some of the Controllors together for lunch in Inverness."

"How interesting!" Mrs. MacDonald boomed. She was herself an Englishwoman, the daughter of a business magnate who had invested a large sum in the marriage. "We're most enthusiastic about waste up here. We are planning to have a dump of our very own in Glenbogle, and we heard Mr. Howe on Wednesday night. What an enthusiast!"

"I am his Principal Private Secretary," said Huffam.

"How interesting!" Mrs. MacDonald boomed. "Then you of course are up to the neck in waste, so to speak. But do tell Mr. Howe from me how much his frank talk touched us. You found a bit of an old plough yesterday, didn't you, Catriona?" she went on, turning to the slightly less large of her daughters. "And she dragged it all the way back to the field we have chosen for our own little crusade. We said jokingly we wished we could send it down to Mr. Apsley Howe himself to show the way his appeal had stirred us in Inverness-shire."

Huffam thanked Heaven inwardly that they had been deterred by the outrageous freight charges of the railway. The thought that he might have had to remove a plough with that bath from Eaton Square was a solemn one indeed.

"When is this pamphlet going to appear, Huffam?" the Regional Controller asked.

"We hope to get it into circulation before Christmas."

"Before Christmas! I hope you will indeed. I understood from Bayne—that's the District Controller at Spean Bridge—we might expect the pamphlet at any

moment now. I understand that Howe's appeal over the wireless . . . I never listen to the wireless myself, can't stand all this ghastly jazz . . . but my wife and girls told me what he said, and I understood this appeal was given to introduce the pamphlet."

"That was the intention, Ben Nevis, but the Ministry of Production have raised the question of waste rubber, and I understand the pamphlet has been held up pending a decision of the question as to whether waste rubber comes within our province."

"We're certainly preparing to handle waste rubber in the Highlands and Islands."

"It was not in the original schedule of recognised waste material," Huffam pointed out. "But we had decided at the Ministry to incorporate it in a supplementary schedule provided the Ministry of Production raised no objection. The matter is being carefully considered at this moment, and I think it will be a valuable point if I can let the Ministry know that you have already envisaged handling waste rubber in the Highlands and Islands."

"By all means tell them we're including rubber up here," said Ben Nevis. "Tourists always leave a certain number of old tyres by the roads."

Huffam took out his notebook, and in his small, neat handwriting recorded that the Regional Controller for the Highlands and Islands was proposing to include waste rubber in the schedule.

"We may decide not to wait for this question of rubber to be settled," he told Ben Nevis. "We can always issue a supplementary pamphlet. We don't want to cancel twenty million copies if a formula can possibly be found. The Ministry of Production are working on the question now, and I have hopes, great hopes, that a formula *will* be found because we have now definitely agreed to exclude fruit and vegetable refuse from our schedule which you will remember *was* notified to you as probable waste material in a leaflet M.W. 467/P.J.Q. 5168A, or was it

§167? I cannot be perfectly sure. Curious! I very seldom forget the reference number of a leaflet."

"I remember some communication about fruit and vegetable refuse, but I didn't pay much attention to it. We haven't any fruit and vegetable refuse in my Region. Of course if Perthshire were included I suppose we should get some raspberry refuse, but I suppose there's very little they can't use for jam."

"How very interesting all this is!" Mrs. MacDonald boomed. "But I do hope rubber will be included. We have at least twenty old hot-water bottles at Glenbogle, which are perfectly useless as they are. Yours burst last night, didn't it, Mary?"

"That was because Timmie bit it. It was a fairly new one," said Mary.

"Naughty little dog!" her mother boomed roguishly.

Yet interesting though the revelations of a permanent official might be of that mysterious hinterland of bureaucracy in which even the future of old hot-water bottles acquired the romance of a State secret, the Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands was determined to show his guest round the Castle in the half-hour that was left before they set out to the gathering of Area and Zonal Controllers in Inverness.

Of what was settled and unsettled, argued over and agreed upon at that gathering, of the avenues that were explored and the angles from which everything was examined, of the amount that was carefully considered and borne in mind that Saturday afternoon in Inverness, and of the yards and yards of red tape that Huffam spun out of himself, nothing shall be related. Because Huffam enjoyed himself it is not necessary to suppose that the reader, who is probably a taxpayer as well, would enjoy himself equally in hearing of the amount of time and money it was proposed to waste in securing to Scotland, England, Wales, and (by special licence from Lord Craigavon) Northern Ireland the full benefit of their own waste

material. The general effect was that the nation was to be so heavily manured that its fertility would be doubled.

"Well," said Huffam, when he and his host drove out of the square in Inverness to make for the road along the left side of Loch Ness on the return journey, "I think that was a very fruitful discussion. Sir Claud Huntbath will be gratified when I tell him how far advanced your plans are in this Region. Very gratified."

"Do you think there will be a good chance of your obtaining an extra grant from the Ministry?" Ben Nevis asked.

"I mustn't commit myself to a definite opinion on that point," Huffam replied. "But I know the Ministry is determined to spend in order to save, and I am hopeful, most hopeful that your application for an extra grant of funds will be favourably received. I can certainly take it upon myself to promise that it will be carefully considered and borne in mind."

"Well, that's very encouraging," said Ben Nevis.

"But I mustn't mislead you. I have no authority to commit the Ministry in any way," Huffam said quickly.

"I only hope that when you have had an opportunity to see for yourself what an anomalous . . . wait a moment, that's not the word I want . . . yes, it is, what an anomalous situation is created by placing Oban and the greater part of Argyll in the other Scottish region . . . I won't call it the Lowlands because it is ridiculous. . . . I don't so much mind about Perthshire, but it is preposterous to exclude the great part of Argyll . . . I only hope you will represent the justice of our contention."

"You can rely on me to make the fullest report I can of every aspect of what I already realise is an extremely delicate situation."

"I do rely on you, Huffam. I'm not flattering you when I say I was enormously impressed by the way you handled that tiresome fellow Munro."

"The Area Controller for East Ross-shire?"

"Yes, Easter Ross we usually call it, by the way. I didn't want him appointed, but there were reasons why he had to be given the job. Yes, you handled him splendidly. Personally, I call it rank lack of patriotism to suggest that there is all that waste at Invergordon. That's a matter for the Admiralty, as you rightly pointed out. I mean to say if a civilian Ministry like yours is going to try to stop waste by the Admiralty and the War Office we might as well hand over the Empire right away."

"Of course in point of fact, Ben Nevis, the Ministry of Waste was actually created during the war for the purpose of controlling the waste of other Government Departments, and in that capacity it did exercise a very salutary check both on the Admiralty and the War Office."

"Ah, in war time it's different. The Services are kept too busy in war time to notice where the money's going, and it's essential to look after it for them. But in peace time they're starved, and I must say I was very glad when you jumped on that fellow Munro."

"I hope I wasn't too abrupt."

"Not at all. Not at all. He's a bit of a Bolshie. And Bolshies ought to be jumped on."

The familiar atmosphere in which Huffam had spent the afternoon, arriving at formulas and exploring avenues and examining proposals from every angle, had made him forget the unfamiliarity of his surroundings. He was musing with satisfaction upon the obvious anxiety of the Foyers Controller of Waste to adhere to the letter of the instructions he had received from the Ministry, and his evident determination to bring the Highland District he controlled into line with the arrangements made for the Home Counties rather than stretch the regulations to suit his own District, when his host suddenly shouted at the top of his voice:

"The Monster, by god! Johnnie! Stop the car, damn it! Stop the car, it's the Monster!"

Johnnie Macpherson the chauffeur jammed on his

brakes, and the Daimler came to a halt at the foot of one of the melancholy green oblongs of foreign conifers with which the Forestry Commission are poulticing the sore places of Caledonia.

The surface of Loch Ness was smooth as a silver tray before the recipient's name has been engraved upon it by the subscribers to a testimonial.

"It's dived," the Chieftain declared. "Why couldn't you pull up quicker, Johnnie?" he added reproachfully. "Damn it, it's dived!"

"I pulled up as soon as I could, Ben Nevis."

"You saw it, Huffam?"

"I can't say I actually saw it, but I was turning over in my mind that admirable point Mr. Thomson made about old electric-light bulbs which . . ."

"Do you mean to say you didn't see it, Johnnie?" the Chieftain interrupted.

"I had both my eyes on the road, Ben Nevis," the chauffeur replied cautiously.

"Well, I saw it. It reared its head out of the loch, and it looked exactly the way those who've seen it say it looks. By Jove, Kilwhillie'll be delighted when he hears I've seen it too. Well, I've never doubted the Monster was there, but it's a satisfaction to have seen it. I wish you'd seen it, Huffam."

"I wish I had."

"Extraordinary coincidence! I was just thinking what a lovely afternoon it would be for the Monster when up it came. It must be at least forty feet long, to judge by that neck."

"It's a great pity he would be diving so quick, Ben Nevis," said the chauffeur.

"Oh, it always does that except when it tears across the loch showing a lot of humps and leaving a wash behind it."

"He's not doing that now, Ben Nevis," said Johnnie Macpherson, eyeing the placid surface.

"Well, I did my best to give you a sight of the Monster, Huffam. I'm afraid it's no use waiting about for it to come up again."

"Och, he'll be after curling himself up quietly at the bottom of the loch, sir," said Johnnie. "He's very cunning."

"I must say I'm glad I've seen it at last," Ben Nevis gloated. "Perhaps I underestimated when I said forty feet long. I believe it's nearer fifty."

"Fancy that now, fifty feet! What a monster!" Johnnie exclaimed. "Will I stop at Spean Bridge, Ben Nevis?"

"Yes, yes, we have to see Mr. Bayne the District Controller of Waste."

"I'm looking forward immensely to hearing his views about the collection of old electric-light bulbs," said Huffam eagerly.

The Daimler moved on.

"The interesting thing is that so many people have described the Monster's head as having rather the appearance of a mane on it," Ben Nevis said. "Now I noticed that at once myself. A sort of rough effect at the back of the neck."

"Not unlike one of your own water-horses," the visitor suggested.

"That's true, by Jove. I see you're a bit of a dab at natural history, Huffam. Well, it's a great satisfaction to have a family legend dating back hundreds of years and then find it confirmed by one's personal experience in the twentieth century," Ben Nevis declared. "Kilwhillie put its length at sixty feet. He may be right, of course. No man in Inverness-shire can judge the weight of a sheep better than Kilwhillie. What I think is so extraordinary is that I should have seen the Monster when you were with me, Huffam. I mean to say, I've driven along Loch Ness hundreds of times and never caught a glimpse of it, and it's so much more satisfactory to have seen it in the company of a cool-headed witness."

"Of course, I didn't actually see it myself," Huffam reminded his host cautiously.

"No, but you saw me see it, or you heard me see it anyway. And so did Johnnie."

The afternoon sank back into prose again while Huffam was discussing the future of the District Control of Waste with Mr. Bayne at Spean Bridge: but when in the deepening dusk the Daimler turned into the fastnesses of Glenbogle poetry returned.

"Well, we've seen the Monster," the Chieftain shouted as he opened the front-door of his Castle and, flinging his bonnet down on the table in the entrance, hurried through into the great hall, where his wife and two daughters were sitting round the hooded hearth on which logs were blazing. "Trixie, Catriona, Mary, we've seen the Monster!"

"Donald!" the Lady of Ben Nevis boomed.

"Yes, it was a few minutes after we'd left Foyers. The light was perfect, and I saw its head coming up out of the loch with a kind of wriggling motion. 'The Monster, by god!' I shouted. Didn't I, Huffam?"

"Yes, you gave me quite a start."

"And then I shouted to Johnnie to stop the car at once, but before we got out the brute had dived."

"Was it like what you expected it would be, Mr. Huffam?" Catriona asked.

"Well, I didn't actually see it myself," he told her.

"It must have spotted the car," Ben Nevis explained. "It dived at once. But I saw enough of it to realise Kilwhillie's probably right when he puts its length at sixty feet. Where is Hugh?"

"He hasn't arrived yet. He said he should hardly manage to get here before seven. We're not dining till eight, you know. Well, Donald dear, I am so glad you've seen the Monster at last. You've been wanting to see it for such a long time." Thus Mrs. MacDonald.

"I know, Trixie. I began to think I was fated never to see it, but Mr. Huffam brought me luck. I must say it

was jolly bad luck, though, not seeing it himself. But the brute went down like a stone. I always did say it had very sharp eyes."

"Yes, I know you've always said that."

"But I had time to see its mane."

"God moves in a mysterious way, Ben Nevis. Yes, yes, a very mysterious way."

This new voice, a cracked feeble voice, startled Huffam. He had not noticed the owner of it, an elderly clergyman, in the shadow of a large grandfather-chair.

"This is my chaplain, Mr. Fletcher: Mr. Huffam of the Ministry of Waste."

"How d'ye do, Mr. Huffam? We've had a beautiful day."

"Yes, I was astonished to find such lovely weather up here. One's told that it always rains in Scotland."

"It does," Mary MacDonald put in deeply.

"Oh no, Mary, we often get lovely weather in October," her sister protested.

"This is the first fine day we've had all the month," Mary insisted.

"And so you missed the Monster, Mr. Huffam," the clergyman said. "What a pity! It would have been a grand memory to carry with you of your first visit to dark Glenbogle. Or have you been here before?"

"This is my first visit to the Highlands," Huffam told him.

"Indeed? I hope you've not been disappointed by our scenery."

"Far from it. And I'm looking forward very much to our drive to Oban to-morrow."

"Well, of course, the scenery of Argyll isn't up to that of Inverness-shire," said Ben Nevis. "It's a pity we can't give you a glimpse of the Prince Charlie country. But business is business. Which reminds me, Mr. Fletcher, can we have Church to-morrow at nine instead of ten?"

"Certainly, Ben Nevis."

"Dear old boy, isn't he?" the Chieftain said to Huffam when they were on the way to dress for dinner. "He coaches my youngest boy in the vacation. He's no bother at all about the place. Reads a lot. Extraordinary the way these reading fellows can amuse themselves. Do you read much?"

"Yes, I read a good deal."

"Lucky chap! Wish I did, but it always gives me pins and needles."

When Huffam left the flamingo-marsh in which his four-poster was situated and walked along the gallery toward the long flight of stairs that led down to the great hall, he heard the loud voice of his host below.

"What struck me so particularly, Hugh, was the brute's eyes. You remember you always compared them to immense rubies? Jolly good comparison! That's exactly what I thought they looked like. I suppose I saw about twelve feet of neck, which bears out your theory that it must be at least sixty feet long."

"Sixty or seventy," came from the voice of a small button-headed man in a kilt who, with a plum-coloured velvet doublet and a pair of long, thin, drooping moustaches, appeared to the first glance of a stranger more like a mandarin than a laird.

"Hugh Cameron of Kilwhillie! Huffam of the Ministry of Waste!" the host barked at them.

"I was awfully sorry I couldn't manage to get over to Inverness this afternoon, but Ben Nevis tells me you had a capital discussion," the new arrival said.

"It was most fruitful. Most fruitful."

"I'm so glad. And I hear you squashed that fellow Munro. I hope you'll be able to squash Druntucket presently. What a pity the Monster dived before you saw it! Well, Donald, you've had your heart's desire."

"Yes, I've seen the Monster."

"I've seen it twice, Mr. Huffam," said Kilwhillie.

"Have you really?"

"Yes, and once it was so close that its wash covered me with spray. I counted eight loops showing simultaneously as it shot past. Allow ten feet for each loop, which is not excessive, I think . . ." he paused.

"I shouldn't imagine at all excessive," Huffam agreed.

"There you are, Donald, I think I was erring on the side of caution when I put it at seventy."

"Perhaps you were, Hugh. Yes, I believe you probably were. Well, as I told you just now, I put the neck alone at twelve feet. Now, my neck's six inches and I'm six foot two. That gives myself an inch a foot. How long would that make the Monster, comparatively speaking?"

"A hundred and forty-four feet," Huffam said.

"Yes, well, I don't think it's quite as long as that," Ben Nevis allowed regretfully. "But of course the proportion between the neck of the Monster and the rest of its body may not be the same as in a human being. I mean to say, the neck may be out of proportion."

"Like a giraffe's," Kilwhillie suggested.

"Exactly, Hugh. Jolly good comparison! Well, if we say between sixty and ninety feet long we shan't be exaggerating."

"It's better to be cautious, Donald. After all, a lot of people don't believe the Monster exists."

The two lairds laughed loudly in derision at such pitiable sceptics, but agreed not to give them a chance of finding a weak spot in the armour of the defenders.

"Some people wouldn't believe in the sun till they got sunstroke," Kilwhillie scoffed.

"How right you are, Hugh. Ah, here's Trixie. Now then, Huffam, what about one of these so-called cocktails for you, or would you prefer an honest dram?"

"Thanks very much, but I never drink between meals."

"Quite right," Ben Nevis applauded as he swallowed a hefty dram of neat whisky.

"Absolutely right," Kilwhillie agreed as he swallowed another, rather more hefty than his host's.

The butler threw open the doors and they all passed into the vaulted dining-hall.

Huffam was caught napping by the Grace and had hardly stood up to his full height than Grace was over, and he was caught a second time. No sooner was he seated than he leapt up again, thinking he'd trodden on a cat's tail, when the doors of the dining-hall were flung open to admit two pipers in full blast, who proceeded to march round and round the table, making what Huffam thought was a most unreasonable noise. He was wondering how conversation would be carried on at dinner when the pipers abruptly marched out again and he heard from the hall an odd noise that sounded as if one of them had hit the other and winded him.

"Mac 'ic Eachainn's Return to Glenbogle," Ben Nevis announced.

Huffam thought Ben Nevis had swallowed his soup the wrong way and looked politely in the other direction.

"Always played when I've spent even a night away from Glenbogle," Ben Nevis elaborated.

"I always envy you your pipers, Donald," said the Laird of Kilwhillie. "They're wonderful pipers, the MacQuats," he added, turning to Huffam.

"I don't know what Mac, I'm afraid," Huffam replied.

"You're not an expert on piping, eh?"

"This is Huffam's first visit to the true and tender North," Ben Nevis explained.

If the Loch Ness Monster had suddenly appeared from under the table the Laird of Kilwhillie might have looked less astonished.

"That piece was originally composed by a MacQuat of the sixteenth century when Hector the Ninth of Ben Nevis burned forty-five Macintoshes in a church. He was the grandson of Hector of the Big Jaw whom I told you about when we passed Loch na Craosnaich this morning."

"Oh, people, of course, how stupid of me," said

Huffam. "I was wondering about mackintoshes as early as the sixteenth century."

"While these Macintoshes were burning that tune was played round the church to drown their shrieks. Mac 'ic Eachainn had returned with a vengeance."

"I'm glad I wasn't Hector's chaplain," said Mr. Fletcher. "I should have been hard put to it to find an excuse for his behaviour."

"Oh, I don't know," Ben Nevis objected. "The Macintoshes had just baked thirty-two MacDonalds in an oven. You don't find anything to be ashamed of in that time, Hugh?"

"Not at all. If I could bake Drumtucket in an oven to-morrow I'd light the sticks myself."

"Kilwhillie, Kilwhillie!" Mr. Fletcher exclaimed reproachfully.

"I'm afraid you'll think us a very bloodthirsty set of barbarians, Mr. Huffam," Mrs. MacDonald boomed.

It was at that moment that the butler came in with a telegram for Huffam.

"Open it, open it," said his host. "It may be from the Ministry."

So Huffam opened it and read:

I hope the bath and the stove reach Ben Nevis safely the perambulator was despatched this morning

Gertrude

At that moment Huffam, so far from being horrified by these savage tales of the past, felt that he could easily have drowned Gertrude in that bath, burnt her body in that paraffin-stove, and tipped the charred remains into Loch Ness in the hope that the Monster would swallow them.

"No bad news, I hope?" Ben Nevis asked, noting anxiously the expression on his guest's face.

"No, no, it's only that some waste material has gone wrong."

"I know exactly how you feel," said Kilwhillie

earnestly. "That's the way I feel when Druntucket tries to butt in to the part of Argyll which is in my Area Control."

"Yes, it is annoying, isn't it?" said Huffam.

The extent of his moral collapse may be judged by his expressing a definite opinion that might commit him to the appearance of taking sides in the dispute which he had been sent up here by the Permanent Secretary to investigate.

Chapter Fifteen

MORE AMATEUR DETECTION

IT was on Saturday morning just as Ben Nevis and his guest were getting into the pre-war Daimler outside the railway-station of Fort William that Mabel had come upstairs at 9 Chillingham Gardens to tell Gertrude that a lady wished to see her.

"Who is it, Mabel?"

"She gave the name of Quekett, madam."

"What does she want?"

"She has some flowers with her."

"Where is she?"

"She's in the hall, madam. I was going to show her up into the drawing-room, but the flowers started dripping earth all over the place, and when I said she'd better leave them in the hall she wouldn't, so I thought I'd better come up and tell you."

"I don't feel at all in the mood to interview strange ladies, Mabel."

"No, madam, and she *is* very strange."

"Tell Miss Joan to speak to her and find out what she wants."

Presently Joan came up to her mother's room.

"I think you'd better see her, Mother."

"But what does she want, dear child?"

"That's what I can't make out. She's brought a lot of Michaelmas-daisy roots with her, and they're making rather a mess in the hall. I think you'll have to come down and see her."

"It's a pity Mabel didn't say I was out," Gertrude grumbled. "However, I suppose I must find out what this person wants."

"She's got a pair of sugar-tongs stuck in her hair at the back."

"Don't be absurd, Joan. People don't wear sugar-tongs. It must be some kind of comb. Oriental or Italian or something."

"Well, it looks exactly like a pair of sugar-tongs."

By the time Gertrude reached the hall one of the Michaelmas-daisy roots had just shed the whole of its earthy attachments in front of the hat-stand and Miss Quekett was eyeing the mess with her head on one side like a bedraggled blackbird on the look-out for worms.

"Miss Quekett, I believe?" Gertrude enquired coldly.

"Yes, and you are?" the little woman chirped.

"I am Mrs. Huffam."

"Oh, I am *so* pleased to meet you," Miss Quekett trilled, and in her eagerness to shake Gertrude's hand she withdrew her support from the bottom of the bundle of Michaelmas-daisy roots, which slid through the moist paper in which they were wrapped and scattered the floor with their sodden mauve blossoms and stalks and mould.

"There now," Miss Quekett commented on the mess. "I've been saying all the way along that that was bound to happen sooner or later, and sure enough I was right. But, no matter, no matter, if we plant them promptly no harm will betide."

"But I don't understand . . ." Gertrude began.

"You are Mrs. Huffam?"

"Yes."

"These are for Mr. Huffam. I owe him reparation."

"Will you come up to the drawing-room?" Gertrude asked quickly. "And, Joan, will you tell Mabel to clear up the mess?"

"Better to plant them promptly," said Miss Quekett. "It's only walnuts and pears you plant for your heirs."

"I'll take them to the garden, Mother," Joan said.

"And I'll come with you," Miss Quekett volunteered, with a smile of supreme amiability.

Gertrude would have felt doubtful in any case of the advisableness of letting Joan go planting Michaelmas-daisies with this strange woman, but her next remark made her positive.

She was eyeing the perambulator in the hall, and suddenly she said:

"That's very like the perambulator I saw going away from Ben Nevis yesterday."

"From Ben Nevis?" Gertrude queried. "Do come upstairs with me, please, Miss Quekett."

She almost hustled the birdlike little woman in rusty-black before her up the stairs, and looking at her back she saw stuck in her hair what certainly did resemble a pair of sugar-tongs so much that Joan could not be blamed for supposing that they were sugar-tongs. But it must be, it *must* be, some kind of Oriental or Italian comb.

"Please sit down, Miss Quekett," Gertrude invited when the door of the drawing-room was closed and the danger of Joan's hearing some appalling revelation about her father's secret life had been obviated. "You say you saw a perambulator like that going away from Ben Nevis yesterday? Who sent it away?"

"It was Mrs. Pinches."

"Mrs. Pinches? Who is Mrs. Pinches?"

"Mrs. Pinches who's with Mr. Glegg."

"On Ben Nevis?"

"Oh, tra-la, tra-la, not *on* Ben Nevis. I never saw them on the roof together."

"On the roof? I don't quite understand. Do you mean on top of the mountain?"

Miss Quekett tittered shrilly.

"Ben Nevis is the name of Mr. Glegg's villa in Oaks Road, Hodford. I live at Sans Souci, Mr. Glegg at Ben Nevis."

"And this Mr. Glegg lives there with Mrs. Pinches?"

"Well, I would rather say Mrs. Pinches lives there with him, but what of it? I never would and never will worry myself about which way things go round. The world's going round too fast as it is I always say, and whatever we do we can't keep up with it."

"Is this Mrs. Pinches a very handsome woman?" Gertrude asked.

"Handsome is as handsome does, and I've never liked the way she stares after me sometimes, but my maid, Elsie Trotter, says I'm too severe."

"You didn't . . . you didn't see anything of a bath, did you, Miss Quekett, at Ben Nevis?"

"Ah, now you're teasing me, Mrs. Huffam."

"No, indeed I'm not. Please don't think that."

"Oh yes, you are, you're teasing me about the . . . ahem, ahem . . . the nightware I threw at Mr. Huffam."

"The nightwear you threw at Mr. Huffam?" Gertrude gasped.

"But the fact of the matter is I lost my temper. Oh yes, there's no other word for it, I lost my temper. Wrong but nice while it lasts, for there's no denying that there is really nothing quite so enjoyable as losing one's temper. But how lucky it wasn't a bath! Yes indeed. Mr. Huffam mightn't be alive to tell the tale if it had been a bath. And I couldn't have gone to the British Museum with a bath, and if I had I couldn't have put it on my head. However, I dug up these Michaelmas-daisies by the light of the waxing moon, and that's my reparation. I couldn't very well go back to the Ministry of Waste after throwing my nightware at them, could I? Oh, tra-la, tra-la, indeed I couldn't! So I found out Mr. Huffam's address, and of course I should have liked to see him, but your maid assures me he's out of London. However, perhaps you'll tell him that it was all done out of patriotism, and there it is. Even Boadicea, who was most patriotic, became violent on occasions. Or so they say in the history books. But there, can one believe what one reads? If we be-

lieved all we read we should have to read so very much less, shouldn't we? And now I must really be going. I have a little reparation to make to Mr. Apsley Howe as well as Mr. Huffam. Another little floral tribute. Yes, yes. And besides saying it with flowers to that wonderful wonderful man, I have to buy some birdseed for Bulbul. Naughty little Bulbul, he wastes such a lot. I told him playfully yesterday that I should ask Mr. Apsley Howe to give him a lecture. Yes indeed, bullfinches must do their bit when this terrible man Mussolini is trying to make us all Roman Catholics. Good-bye, Mrs. Huffam. I'm sorry my daisies misbehaved themselves in your hall, but flowers always fidget till they're planted again. They feel so bare about the roots, poor things."

"One moment, Miss Quekett. Could you tell me if Mrs. Pinches has any sons?"

"Oh yes, she has two, but they don't often visit Ben Nevis. Mr. Glegg was prejudiced against them after they broke the window of his den with a ball. But they're nearly grown up now."

"Tots no longer," Gertrude breathed to herself.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, it was nothing. Is this Mrs. Pinches . . . has she the reputation of being . . . of being at all fast?"

"No faster than any of us in Hodford if you go by what you hear. I have the reputation of being fast myself. According to Mrs. Chicksands, that is. But I'm too fast for Mrs. Chicksands sometimes. She and Mr. Burge and the rest of them were very busy with their rubbish, but I worked hard all night on every one I had without a handle and they were delivered by me personally at Mr. Apsley Howe's residence before the Burge and Chicksands rubbish had left Hodford. But really I must be going, Mrs. Huffam, and you will tell Mr. Huffam that I made my reparation, won't you? You see, I only *just* missed him the day before yesterday."

Miss Quekett moved quickly to the door, and Gertrude,

though she felt that in letting the birdlike little woman go she was losing her only chance of penetrating to the heart of the mystery which had overcast the brightness of her married life, could think of no excuse to detain her.

"Ah, the Michaelmas-daisies have been taken off to be planted," Miss Quekett trilled. "Well, I must say that's a relief to me, because whenever people don't appreciate my gifts, I always throw them at them. And now I really must go and see about Bulbul's birdseed. He must not have excess of hemp. It makes him too excited, the naughty little fellow."

A minute later and Miss Quekett was on her way down Chillingham Gardens, taking now three steps with her right foot, now three with her left in a kind of stately polka.

Back in her own room Gertrude tried to build up from her visitor's obscure allusions a coherent picture of what Olly was up to.

It was clear that the perambulator didn't come from Ben Nevis, but from this house in Hodford. Then why had Olly gone up to Ben Nevis in Scotland? It was clear too that this Mrs. Pinches had deserted him for this Mr. Glegg with whom she was now living. But that didn't explain the bath and the stove. Yet it wouldn't follow that because Miss Quekett didn't see a bath go to where this Pinches woman was living with this Glegg man the bath had not gone there. And then there was Miss Quekett herself. Was it really conceivable that Olly made dishonourable proposals to Miss Quekett? She threw her nightwear at him apparently. It had been difficult to extract from her a perfectly consecutive account of what had happened. There were moments when one might have been excused for fancying that she was slightly off her head. Of course women were driven mad by unrequited love. Nightwear? Why should she throw her nightwear at Olly unless he was in her bedroom. Yet, in fairness to Olly, she had never suggested that.

While Gertrude was puzzling her head over Miss

Quekett's inconsequence Mabel came up to say that there was a Mr. Smith in the hall who wanted to see Mr. Huffam.

"Didn't you tell him the master had gone to Scotland?"

"Yes, madam, and he asked to see you. It's about a bath."

"A bath?" Gertrude repeated in some agitation. "What sort of person is he?"

"I couldn't exactly say, madam. He looks a bit gypsified. And in fact if he wasn't wearing spectacles I'd say he *was* one of these gypsies. He gave me his card. It said he was a Sanitary something."

"Where is the card?"

"I dropped it, madam. He give me such a piercing sort of a look I came all over hot and cold for a moment and dropped his card, and I thought to myself I daresn't bend down and pick it up in case he hit me over the head. And if you don't mind, madam," she gabbled abruptly, "I'll give you a month's notice."

"You're going to leave me, Mabel?"

Mabel burst into tears.

"Well, madam, I don't want to leave you. I'm sure, I've been very happy here. But everything's been so funny, what with baths coming here and going away in the dead of night and the master so strange in his manner and that perambulator arriving and then that barmy woman coming and looking at me so queer and now this fellow with a hump on his back and black sideboards . . ."

"Black sideboards," Gertrude gasped. "You don't mean to tell me that sideboards are arriving here now?"

"No, madam. Whiskers I mean."

"I'll go down and see what he wants."

"You'll mind out he doesn't knife you, madam, won't you?"

"Don't be so hysterical, Mabel. And you'd better reconsider what you said to me about leaving. I shan't accept your notice till you tell me calmly that you are

desirous of quitting my service. It would not be fair to you, Mabel."

"I'm sure you've always been very considerate, madam," Mabel said, bursting into sobs again.

Gertrude set out with quiet dignity to interview the new arrival.

"Well, I'll say this for Her, Cook. She didn't turn a hair. She may be fussy about the silver, but when I told Her there was that gypsified Sanitary something or other waiting in the hall and for all I knew he was going to stick a knife into Her, She never turned a hair. Just walked out of the room as quiet as you like."

Thus did Mabel describe her mistress's exit to Cook.

"Mrs. Huffam?" the disguised amateur detective asked.

"I am Mrs. Huffam, yes."

"I've called to enquire about a bath which I understand is being fitted up in this house. I am a Sanitary Expert. Here is my card, madam. Your maid dropped the card I gave her to take up to you."

"I am not having any bath fitted up," Gertrude said firmly, without looking at the card in her hand.

"Oh, you're not?"

Here the self-styled Mr. Henry Smith favoured Gertrude with one of those soul-piercing glances, the technique of which he had studied in an American publication called *The Power of the Human Eye*. In this diffident young clerks were taught to raise their salaries from ten dollars a week to a hundred by bringing out their latent powers of magnetism.

"Then I must have been misinformed," Mr. Henry Smith went on, still fixing Gertrude with that terrific gaze. "Perhaps the bath was not being fitted up in *this* house?"

"What bath are you referring to?"

"To the bath which was delivered here by a motor-van some time after midnight last Thursday."

"Are you . . . are you a detective?"

It was all Mr. Glegg could do not to seize Gertrude's

hand and wring it in congratulation, but he managed to remind himself that, however pleasant it was to be taken for what it was his ambition to be, he was not at this moment supposed to be a detective but a Sanitary Expert.

"I'm a Sanitary Expert, Mrs. Huffam, and I was struck by this particular bath, which was of a type I had not come across in my sanitary work, and I was wondering where such a bath could be found."

"I'm afraid I cannot give you any information."

"I see. You don't know where Mr. Huffam sent that bath. He didn't take it with him to Scotland, I suppose?"

"I have nothing to do with my husband's business," said Gertrude coldly, "and so I see no reason to prolong this interview, Mr. . . ." she looked down at the card in her hand to recall the name of this unpleasant hump-backed man with black whiskers:

MR. ROBERT GLEGG

*Ben Nevis,
Oaks Road, Hodford.*

Gertrude gathered together the emotions which were rushing about in her brain like frightened minnows in a jamjar.

"Will you come upstairs, Mr. Glegg," she said. "I cannot say what I want to say in my front-hall."

It was now the amateur detective's turn to display self-control.

"Why do you call me Glegg, madam?"

"Because that is the name on your card which you gave me by mistake. You live at Ben Nevis where that perambulator comes from." She pointed a stern finger to where the perambulator was standing further along the hall.

"There is some mistake, Mrs. Huffam," said the amateur detective, and as he followed her upstairs he searched for the brilliant lie which would extricate him from the blunder of giving her the wrong card.

By the time the drawing-room was reached he had decided what to say.

"I am not Mr. Robert Glegg, but I know Mr. Glegg. He is a personal friend of mine. An intimate friend."

"And is Mrs. Pinches an intimate friend of yours?"

"Mrs. Pinches?" the amateur detective repeated. He had not bargained for the tables being turned on him in this way. In detective stories it was the detective who asked all the questions.

"Mrs. Pinches," Gertrude repeated sternly.

"Mrs. Pinches is my . . . that is Mr. Glegg's house-keeper."

"Is she?" Gertrude asked in what was almost a vicious tone.

"But to return to the bath," Mr. Glegg said quickly. "The bath was sent by mistake to Ben Nevis, Hodford, from Mr. Oliver Huffam of 9 Chillingham Gardens."

"By whose mistake?"

"Apparently the carrier's. Mr. Glegg discovered the mistake at once because the bath and the stove . . . there was a paraffin-stove too . . . were addressed to Ben Nevis in Scotland. He sent it back at once to Mr. Huffam, and being anxious to know what had happened, he asked me to make enquiries."

"Does Mr. Glegg know my husband?"

"I believe he met him once at Hodford."

It was a struggle to repel the temptation to ask if Mrs. Pinches knew her husband, but she did repel it.

"And the perambulator, was that a mistake of the carrier's?"

"The perambulator should also have been sent to Scotland," said the amateur detective recklessly. "Mr.

Glegg understood that Mr. Huffam was furnishing a house in Scotland."

He did not care what he said now, for in the embarrassment caused by his mistake over the visiting-card, his hump had dropped about twelve inches and he was beginning to wonder if it was going to slip down altogether. He pulled his overcoat closer, and said he was sorry but he had an important appointment. As the amateur detective's evident anxiety increased, Gertrude grew more and more positive that he was no more a Sanitary Expert than she was. Her pride, however, forbade her to ask him any more questions. They must be answered by Olly when he came back from Scotland.

Yes, the hump was slipping slowly but surely all the time.

"I really must go, Mrs. Huffam. I hope I've made everything perfectly clear."

He rushed from the room, his hump wagging at the spot it had now reached, with the effect of an Aylesbury duck's rump.

As soon as her visitor was gone Gertrude rang up the Ministry of Waste and asked to be put through to Mr. Upwey.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Upwey . . . this is Gertrude Huffam speaking. What is Oliver's address in Scotland, he went off in such a hurry he forgot to give it to me? . . . Glenbogle Castle . . . I have to wire him about something . . . so sorry to trouble you . . . good-bye."

She put back the receiver, and dialled King's Cross:

"Will you call at 9 Chillingham Gardens to collect a perambulator which I want to send up to Scotland at once."

Those who criticise Gertrude's impulsive action and blame her for lack of faith in her husband are asked to remember that they have probably escaped the ordeal of interviewing strange women with armfuls of Michaelmas-daisies and sugar-tongs in their back hair and strange men

with mobile humps and black whiskers and magnetic stares. They have not seen their husbands loading baths and stoves on motor-vans in the middle of the night or received perambulators with sentimental reflections on the maturity of what so short a while ago were tots. It is easy for the onlooker to criticise.

Chapter Sixteen

AND STILL MORE

THE tighter Mr. Glegg pulled his overcoat round him the more closely did his posterior structure approximate to that of an Aylesbury duck. As he limped as fast as he could toward Chillingham Square where he had parked his Baby Austin, the kindly folk of South Kensington turned round to stare compassionately at so curious a deformity.

"Dearie me, what an affliction," sighed one elderly nurse wheeling a perambulator in which two little girls were tugging at either end of a doll both desired to mother exclusively.

"It makes anybody think, doesn't it?" said a younger nurse wheeling a mail-cart in which was seated a two-year-old boy with the stolid countenance of a stuffed guy. "And will you turn your toes out, Master Michael," she snapped at a five-year-old walking beside the mail-cart. "You don't want to walk like that poor man when you're grown up, do you? But you will, you naughty boy, if you keep your toes turned in like that."

"Well, we don't know how lucky we are till we see somebody like that, and that's a fact," the older nurse observed.

"I expect he hurries along like that because he feels people are staring at him. Shocking, isn't it?"

At this moment the head of the doll which was being fought for in the perambulator came off, and both little girls set up a howl which diverted attention from Mr. Glegg, who soon afterwards reached his car.

In taking his seat he did not allow for the effect of his hump's displacement, and dented his bowler against the roof. The inside of a Baby Austin is not a gymnasium,

and after trying for a while to get his hump into position again Mr. Glegg decided to repair to the lavatory at Gloucester Road Station. As he got out of the car the hump lost further height; under the impression that it was making for the pavement, he dived down the wrong entrance in his agitation and found himself confronted by an obese and angry old woman with a mop.

"This is the Ladies'," she wheezed at him.

Mr. Glegg fled back the way he had come.

"Funny thing, men are always in more of a hurry than what women are," the guardian of the Mysteries muttered to herself as she began to swab the floor. "Put that off just the same as they put off everything else. Look at her now, calm as you like. Might be going to church. But men!"

She twirled her mop to show what she thought of men.

Mr. Glegg emerged presently with his hump where it ought to be, and drove toward Eaton Square. Mortified by the mistake he had made over the visiting-card, he was determined to recover his self-respect by the skill with which he conducted his investigations at the residence of Mr. Apsley Howe.

"Good-morning," he said to William, who opened the door. "I have called about a bath." He proffered his card—the right one this time—to the footman. "I believe I am right in saying a bath was sent away from here last Thursday?"

"A bath was sent away from here, yes," William admitted.

"Could you oblige me with its present whereabouts?"

"I couldn't at all."

"It's a matter of some importance," the amateur detective pressed.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about this bath except it was sent off from here three times."

"It went first with a Mr. Huffam, I believe?"

"That's right."

"And again with a Holdall Transport van?"

"I couldn't be sure of that, but it went with a Holdall Transport van yesterday morning. There was a paraffin-stove too. I understood from the driver he was taking it back to his head-office for further instructions. There was some misunderstanding, because the butler who had the orders had left for Mr. Howe's place in the country."

"Where is that?"

"High Fettle."

"And where's that?"

"In Sussex. Great Eating is the nearest station. Mr. Howe and her Ladyship will be there over the week-end."

"You say the bath was sent here by mistake in the first place?" said the amateur detective.

"I'm afraid I can't say anything about that. It came here without any name."

"You understand, of course, it may be a police matter?" the amateur detective added, bringing the full blaze of his magnetic eyes upon the footman, who bore it without a blink or a tremor.

"Is that so?" he observed unemotionally.

"In fact at one time it looked as if it might be a murder case."

"Fancy that."

William was still unmoved. It was difficult to move him after two years with Dawkins.

"And I don't suppose you'd like to be mixed up in a police-case?" the amateur detective suggested.

"I wouldn't mind."

Mr. Glegg gave it up. One could not contend with unimaginative blocks like this. He decided on a bold stroke. He would test his disguise on Holdall Transport. Several of the drivers there knew him well. If they did not recognise him he could consider himself unrecognisable.

The first driver he saw when he went into the yard of the garage in Euston Road was George Hipkiss, to whom he had often spoken at the Works.

"I want to see the Manager," he said, adding to his disguise a squint.

"You'll find Mr. Cordingley's office over there in the corner of the yard," George Hipkiss told him.

Not a hint of recognition! This was gratifying. Mr. Glegg had only met the manager of Holdall Transport once for a few minutes, but he guarded against accidents by intensifying the obliquity of his squint and imparting to his voice some curious overtones between a growl and a gurgle.

"You are Mr. Cordingley the Manager?"

"That's right."

"I've come to enquire about a bath which one of your drivers removed from 189 Eaton Square yesterday morning."

"He did remove it, yes," Mr. Cordingley admitted unwillingly. "But it was under a misapprehension."

"Oh, it was under a misapprehension, was it?" Mr. Glegg asked, squinting with such ferocity that the Holdall manager snatched at the receiver on his desk and called down to send Hipkiss up immediately.

"I've sent for the driver, Mr. . . ."

"Henry Smith."

The card was not proffered this time. Mr. Glegg hoped he was being taken for a professional detective.

"Or that is what I may be called for the purpose of this enquiry."

He squinted so terrifically at the word enquiry that for a moment he thought a nursery warning had come true and that his eyes had stuck. However, it was a false alarm.

"Not a police enquiry?" asked Mr. Cordingley.

Mr. Glegg shrugged his shoulders—a trivial enough gesture ordinarily, but a pretty portentous one when you shrug with one shoulder an outsize cushion as well.

"This is George Hipkiss, the driver who took delivery of the bath yesterday morning," said Mr. Cordingley.

"Our original instructions came from a Mr. Oliver Huffam of 9 Chillingham Gardens, S.W. 7, who rang us up later on Thursday night and asked us to take a bath and a paraffin-stove to a town about twenty miles north of London. The exact destination was not given, but when our driver Frederick Caffyn took delivery he was instructed by this Mr. Huffam to take the bath and the stove to a Mr. Robert Glegg of Ben Nevis, Oaks Road, Hodford, who by a curious coincidence is an old customer of ours."

"Wait a minute. I'll take a note of that name and address," said Mr. Glegg himself. "Is anything known of this man Glegg?"

"He's the manager of the Hodford Paper Works," Mr. Cordingley replied.

"I know him," Hipkiss put in. "Little chap with a long nose and quick way of speaking. I always found him very civil-spoken. Wears glasses. A bit like yourself if it comes to that."

Mr. Glegg squinted now at George Hipkiss, who involuntarily took a step back.

"Like me, is he?" he growled.

"Well, I wouldn't hardly say 'like', but when you spoke to me in the yard you reminded me of him a bit. But it's not what you'd call a real likeness."

"And what did this man Glegg do when the bath and stove were sent to him?" the amateur detective went on.

"He told Caffyn the driver to take them back where he got them."

"Strange," commented the amateur detective.

"Fred Caffyn said he went right up in the air when he heard this bath and stove was for him," Hipkiss put in.

"And he warned him not to have nothing to do with this bath and stove because it might mean a police case. So of course poor old Fred, who can't stand anything to do with the police ever since his father's sister's husband was charged with interfering with little girls on Ealing Com-

mon, poor old Fred, as I say, dropped this bath and stove like a hot brick."

"And then this Mr. Huffam rang up again to ask if we knew of a rubbish dump nearer than Hodford," the Manager went on. "I ought to explain that I had not at that time heard Caffyn's story, and so I gave Hipkiss here instructions to take the bath and stove to a rubbish dump this side of Uxbridge. Hipkiss, however, could not collect the charges at 189 Eaton Square and came back here for instructions. Meanwhile, Caffyn had given us the warning then. So I told Caffyn to take the bath and stove to Mr. Huffam at the Ministry of Waste."

"And which he did," put in Hipkiss. "And then he was told Mr. Huffam was at the Pe-tight Sardine in Greek Street, Soho. So he up and took the bath and the stove along there and left them on the pavement outside, and come straight back here."

"Where's Caffyn?" Mr. Glegg asked.

"He won't be on duty till two o'clock this afternoon."

"Then it would seem as if I must make my next enquiries at the . . . what's the name of this restaurant?"

"P-E—Pe. T-I-G-H-T—Tight. And Sardine anybody knows," Hipkiss replied.

"Is it permissible to enquire whether there is much likelihood of this business going any further?" Mr. Cordingley asked anxiously. "I mean we don't want Holdall Transport to be mixed up in any unpleasant publicity. I mean to say, it's not murder or anything like that?"

"It has not yet been definitely established as murder," the amateur detective answered. "But that's all I'm at liberty to tell you."

"Quite. I realise that. I take it you are from Scotland Yard?"

"That question also I'm afraid I am not at liberty to answer."

"Well, it'll be very bad luck if Holdall Transport are dragged into it," said Mr. Cordingley. "We wouldn't

touch the things as soon as we heard through Mr. Glegg that the police were interested."

"Once one starts in a case of this sort, there's no knowing where it will end," said the amateur detective.

"I hope it will be appreciated that Holdall Transport have done everything to put any information they had at the service of the police," Mr. Cordingley murmured anxiously.

Mr. Glegg shook hands with him and limped out of the office.

"If Fred Caffyn thinks he's going to keep out of the witness-box, Fred Caffyn's made a big mistake. A very big mistake Fred Caffyn's made," George Hipkiss opined when the visitor had left the office. "And I won't half tell Fred Caffyn so, what's more, when he comes in at two o'clock."

"It hasn't yet been definitely established as murder," said the Manager hopefully.

"It will be," George Hipkiss prophesied in lugubrious tones. "I knew it wasn't ordinary black on that blooming stove when I first handled it. I reckon that was where he burnt the bits and pieces."

"Bits and pieces of what?"

"Bits and pieces of the pore girl he done in. But they'll cop him. Gawd, I wouldn't care to do any pore girl in and be followed about by that cross-eyed dick. Give me the creeps proper, he did."

"I suppose he *was* a detective," said Mr. Cordingley meditatively.

"Why, what else would he be?"

"I don't know. It occurred to me it might be the murderer himself trying to find what had happened to that bath and stove. I don't believe those whiskers were genuine."

"Well, 'struth, Mr. Cordingley, he looked more like a murderer than a detective now you come to mention it."

"Anyhow, the best thing for us to do is nothing at

all. Don't you go opening your mouth too wide about this, Hipkiss."

Meanwhile, Mr. Glegg, delighted by the way he had impressed his assumed personality upon Holdall Transport, drove off to the Petite Sardine. When he arrived at the restaurant he asked for the proprietor, and Monsieur Gustav came forward.

"I wish to make some enquiries about a bath and a stove which I understand from information received were brought to this restaurant yesterday," said Mr. Glegg.

"Ah, you come to see me about a barf and a stove, *hein?*" the Frenchman replied, his countenance darkening, his fingers clawing at the air rich with various cooking smells. "Perhaps it is you who bring that . . ." here he went off into French, where his questioner could not follow him.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Glegg, "but I don't speak French. I'd like to speak to somebody who can speak English."

"You spik to me about this barf and stove. I am the proprietor of this restaurant. And I tell you I will not have no more barfs and stoves again, and if you bring your damn barfs and stoves again I give you to the police."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. There's a slight misunderstanding," said Mr. Glegg. "I'm looking for the fellow who did bring this bath and stove. I didn't bring it here myself."

"And I say god damn and damn your barf and stove . . . *sacré nom d'un nom, est-ce que je devrais m'emmerder avec ce sale bain et ce sale poêle? Ah, mais non, par exemple, je ne suis pas ici pour . . .*"

"Hi! Stoppez-vous! It's no use you talking French to me. I can't follow you."

One of Mr. Glegg's favourite heroes of fiction was a French detective, but *he* never put the slightest strain on readers' French beyond an occasional 'oui' just to remind one he was French.

"Well, please to go, sir," said the proprietor, whose forehead was damp with rage. "It makes me mad to hear about zat barf."

"But can't you tell me where it went after it left your restaurant?"

Monsieur Gustave raised his arms in an appeal to Heaven to deliver him from further comment.

"How in the hell can I say where this barf goes? It goes, and I thank good god it is gone. You sink it is nice for me when I look out of the door and see what the little boys make in zat barf? It is ignoble! *C'est infect!*"

"Well, I'm very sorry to hear you had all this trouble with the bath, but all I want to know is where it went to."

"I do not know. *Je m'en fiche!*"

And then words failed Monsieur Gustave even in French, and he began to dance about in the passage.

"The last thing I want is to irritate you," Mr. Glegg said soothingly. "I just hoped you might be able to tell me where the bath went after it left your restaurant. The police might be interested to know."

Mr. Glegg would have tried his magnetic stare on the proprietor if he had thought it would stand the least chance against that bristling mat of black hair or that bootbrush of a beard, but he knew it would have none, and he relied on the magic of the word 'police'.

"Ze police!" shouted Monsieur Gustave. *M—— pour la police!* You understand what I say?"

"I don't, I'm afraid."

"When I ask the police to stop what zese boys make in the barf, *ils restent immobiles, mais immobiles! Comme des figures de cire!* How you say it? Like woxwax!"

The magic of the word 'police' had failed this time, and Mr. Glegg tried one more appeal.

"That bath was stolen from my house."

"*Alors, monsieur*, then you must be very content, because *jamais jamais de la vie je n'ai vu un bain tellement sale, tellement ignoble, tellement infect, tellement dégoûtant.*"

"Well, I wish you'd tellmong where it is now."

"*Eh bien, vous vous moquez de moi, n'est-ce pas?*"

"I'm not mocking you at all if that's what you're trying to say. I asked you a simple question and you go off the deep end as if I'd put the bath outside your restaurant."

"I do not know where the barf is. I have telephoned to the Ministere and I am answered by an *imbécile*."

"The Ministry of Waste, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes, it is it."

"Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you, good-morning."

"*Bon jour, monsieur*."

Mr. Glegg got into his car and headed for Whitehall. It was a bold step, but disguised as he was it was justifiable. He might find out if Huffam had taken the bath and stove to Scotland.

There is always an appearance of great activity in a Government Office on Saturday morning, due to the exhilarating prospect of the week-end. That Saturday morning at the Ministry of Waste, Assistant Secretaries, Principals and Assistant Principals were hurrying about the corridors with bundles of papers under their arms. One Principal Assistant Secretary actually walked across to the room of another Principal Assistant Secretary to obtain a verbal answer to a question which on any morning but Saturday he would have written out and sent across to his colleague, expecting to receive a written answer three or four days later.

In the hurry and scurry of a Ministry roused from its lethargy by the thought of golf, it was some time before Mr. Glegg was able to secure the attention of the Janitor.

"Yes, what do you want?" that august figure demanded at last.

"I've come to make some enquiries about a bath which was . . ."

"Sergeant Perkins!"

The Assistant Janitor stepped forward.

"Show this gentleman the way out, will you?"

"But . . ."

"Come along, sir," said Sergeant Perkins, V.C.

And, firmly gripped by an iron hand, Mr. Glegg was led outside. Sergeant Perkins was taking him along toward the gate when Mr. Glegg exclaimed:

"My car."

"Your car?"

"That is my car."

"You're going to drive off in it? You're not going to leave it here?" The Assistant Janitor demanded sternly.

"Why should I leave it here? I called about a bath which . . ."

"Better hop in quickly," said the Assistant Janitor persuasively.

As Mr. Glegg steered his Baby Austin from Wharton Terrace into Whitehall he was seized, as so many good citizens have been, with a sudden disgust of the bureaucracy.

"Damn it, I'll go and investigate what's going on at High Fettle," he declared aloud, nearly running into a taxi in the excitement of his resolve.

"Now then, don't start hopping on to me with that performing flea of yours," the driver leaned out to admonish.

But Mr. Glegg scorned the argument to which he was being challenged. The way he had been practically hustled out of the Ministry of Waste at the mere mention of the word 'bath,' besides the irritation of being treated so discourteously by people to whose salaries he contributed as a taxpayer, had confirmed his suspicions that an attempt was being made to cover up a scandal which struck at the very roots of public life. Mr. Glegg had no time to argue with taxi-drivers. He had passed from the investigation of domestic crime into the ampler ether of William le Queux and Phillips Oppenheim. He was tracking down a political secret. He had no doubt by

now that he had jumped too hastily to conclusions about Oliver Huffam. So far from Huffam being personally involved in anything disreputable he was obviously acting under orders from those above. That would explain why Mrs. Huffam had evidently been puzzled by her husband's behaviour. Yes, Huffam was to sacrifice himself, his good name, and his domestic happiness if it was necessary. Viewed from this new angle Huffam was a noble fellow willing to be misjudged by the world if thereby he could save his superiors from the consequences of what they had done. But what had they done? What blunder had been committed which made it of vital importance to get rid of that bath and stove? The rest of the rubbish deposited in Nobbs' Bottom was obviously a ruse to cover the successful disappearance of the bath. Perhaps even the stove was unimportant. After all, it was the accident of its being dropped in Tottenden which had given the stove a fictitious importance. It had probably been included as a cover for the bath like the birdcages and the perambulator and the mangle and the rest of the stuff.

The bath was the key to the mystery. It was the failure of Huffam to get rid of the bath in Nobbs' Bottom which had tempted him to the fatal move of trying to plant it on himself. Yet, after all, if he had not taken his motor-bicycle and shadowed the motor-van back to Hodford he would have been woken by Mrs. Pinches yesterday morning with the news that there was a bath in his front garden. Huffam could not be blamed for that fatal move. He was not to know that he had chosen as the recipient of the bath a man who had devoted all his enthusiasm to spotting the murderer in the first hundred pages. He was not to presume that in addition to being a solver of mysteries this man on whom he had planted the bath was a devotee of action, of swift and ruthless action, and therefore capable of shadowing him on a motor-bicycle. It must have been a fearful moment for Huffam and an equally fearful moment for the Statesman when the bath

came back to 189 Eaton Square. It argued something like desperation when Huffam travelled all the way up to Scotland to get rid of the bath there. The amateur detective, with the Baby Austin headed south-west, began to go over the clues he had accumulated to-day. No doubt the right place to go over clues was in the tranquillity of one's own den. Still, one could not neglect the going over of the clues just because the pace of the action was so tremendous.

What had he learned from that wooden-faced footman? That the bath had been brought back to 189 Eaton Square and immediately removed again, and that Apsley Howe had gone down to this place High Fettle. He would stop for lunch in Kingston and study a map. It had been evident that the footman knew nothing about the bath, and that like others of his class he took a pleasure in pretending not to be surprised by anything that happened. That was an old game with flunkys. No doubt in the servants' hall there had been plenty of speculation about that bath. Still, they weren't likely to *know* anything.

Mrs. Huffam? It had been pretty clear that she suspected her husband was engaged on a difficult and perhaps dangerous mission, but obviously she had not been taken into his confidence. Well, that was as it should be. No sensible man was going to tell his wife State secrets. It should be remembered that Mr. Glegg was matrimonially innocent and may therefore be forgiven for supposing that statesmen and permanent officials were always in this respect sensible men. Mrs. Huffam? How did Mrs. Huffam know that his housekeeper was called Mrs. Pinches?

Mr. Glegg was so much intrigued by this question that he went three times round a traffic roundabout and was invited by a policeman to explain what he thought he was doing.

"These roundabouts aren't put up for fun, you know."

"I'm sorry, officer, I was thinking."

"Well, if you were thinking, you ought to think not to go three times round a traffic roundabout and ready to go a fourth time if I hadn't have stopped you. Don't do it again. A man of your age ought to know better than behave like a kid in an amusement park."

Mr. Glegg went bouncing on again into the southwest. How had Mrs. Huffam known the name of his housekeeper? How had she? It was a riddle. Suddenly the solution occurred to him. Of course! She must have rung up Ben Nevis to make enquiries about the perambulator, and Mrs. Pinches would have given her name. In the exhilaration of this solution Mr. Glegg did something to his Baby Austin which caused it to emulate so far as it was possible the bucking of a horse. Another policeman stepped forward.

"What d'ye think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, officer. It was unintentional."

"Well, be more careful next time. Your back wheels were right off the road. Let me see your driving-licence."

The policeman inspected it.

"I suppose you got this before they started tests?"

"I have been driving now for over fifteen years without an accident."

"Well, you won't drive fifteen minutes without an accident if you go jumping about the road like that again. All right, you've been warned, mind."

Mr. Glegg bounced on, indifferent to the censure of the policeman in the pleasure of having discovered how Mrs. Huffam knew his housekeeper's name. He chuckled too at the thought of Mrs. Pinches' reaction to the voice of Mrs. Huffam at the other end of the telephone. When one remembers what Gertrude was suffering it is difficult not to be impatient with this bachelor's light-heartedness.

The Frenchman? Nothing to be learnt from him. He had obviously been used by Huffam as a temporary convenience. But the Ministry! Ah, that was another story. The very moment he had mentioned the word 'bath' he

had been as good as run out of the place. It was obvious that the janitors had been warned to be on the look-out for people enquiring about a bath. However, it had been a stupid attempt to blanket the business. It had merely had the effect of making him more determined than ever to solve the mystery. What was he going to find out at this place High Fettle?

Mr. Glegg accelerated, and a dog ran yapping after the Baby Austin, probably supposing that somebody had thrown a ball for it to retrieve.

It was about four o'clock when Mr. Glegg pulled up at the Blue Dragon, Great Eating, the village two miles from Mr. Apsley Howe's old converted Sussex farmhouse, High Fettle. As he enquired for a night's lodging, reveling in the grand old rustic smell of beer and sawdust and gaspers that came from the public-bar, he felt like the middle-aged hero of an escapist novel who, by discarding pin-striped trousers for green corduroy shorts and the open road, finds the meaning of life with a capital L. He went upstairs to his bedroom to adjust his hump and get rid of his limp by removing the blotting-paper from his boot. He was tired of that limp, and after all nobody knew him in Great Eating.

Chapter Seventeen

HIGH FETTL

HIGH FETTL was a conspicuous example of the advance of parvenu taste which was such a feature of the period after the First Great War for Civilisation. Once upon a time new wealth delighted to show off its resources by building in Surrey enormous piles of bricks and mortar which resembled the hotels and hydros of watering-places salt and fresh. Then, under the combined influence of high taxation and of the female aristocrats by which the second generation had dutifully set out to improve the breed and secure for the third generation a really remarkable imitation of the genuine article, it became the fashion to acquire old farmhouses in Sussex and convert them into the luxurious week-end retreats which provided the rustic background still inseparable from the majority's conception of the English gentleman. Twenty-five years ago High Fettle had been a long low building of mellow red brick set in a wooded fold of the Downs, with a view across the majestic countryside that inspired the paeans of so many contemporary poets. Architects had descended upon it and picked every bit of timber as clean of plaster as carrion-crows will pick bones clean of flesh. The old garden in front with flower-beds edged with pinks, clumps of white lilies, and a perfumed tangle of cabbage-roses vanished under a terrace and loggia . . . but why continue? High Fettle was one of a hundred similar houses in the neighbourhood which demonstrated that English country-life could be adapted to the standards of the twentieth century, that remoteness did not necessarily involve discomfort, and that rich men could be trained to beg for beauty as easily as poodles for tit-bits.

It is a pity that we can only visit High Fettle at the

very end of October, when the two glorious herbaceous borders, which are the *chef d'œuvre* of the nurseryman who designed them, are long past their best, and when the view is veiled in a dark mist which makes the loggia look like a corner of a deserted seaside promenade.

It was across this loggia that Mr. Apsley Howe passed on the way to visit his Guernsey cows at a quarter to five of this Saturday. The conversation of the house-party had been concentrated upon horses throughout the afternoon. The first meet of the season was due on Monday week. The Cambridgeshire would be run at Newmarket next Wednesday. The Minister of Waste was not a horseman. His father, John Howe (second generation) of Howe's Household Jams made from the Finest Hand-picked Fruit, had not encouraged horsiness, although he had welcomed warmly his engagement to Lady Lavinia Lustie. The Minister of Waste indeed was not even a sportsman, for his having coxed the Trinity Hall Eight during his three years at Cambridge would have had to be attributed to his convenient weight rather than to athletic prowess.

As Mr. Howe crossed the loggia he felt a glow of pleasure at the thought of the jolly talk he would have with Pyefinch his cowman. He was deliberately dodging tea because his brother-in-law, Feltham, with that unpardonable Mrs. Blore, was expected about tea-time and inevitably the Cambridgeshire would be discussed all over again. No doubt it would be discussed at dinner too, but at any rate there would be champagne at dinner, and it was a great deal easier to endure horsey talk on champagne than it was on tea.

Primrose, Cowslip, Buttercup, Marigold, Sunflower, and Crocus, those lovely golden cows, and Champion Bongo of High Fettle, that superb golden bull! Their owner's heart beat faster at the thought of spending half an hour in such sweet-scented company.

"Good-afternoon, Pyefinch. How are the cows?"

"Doing fine, sir, doing beautiful," said the cowman, a large man with a look of Abraham Lincoln about him.

"I intended to come along earlier but . . . hulloa, what was that?"

"What were what, sir?"

"I thought something scuttled along at the other end of the house."

"I didn't see anything, sir."

"I didn't see anything, but I heard something. Do you get many rats in here?"

"I wouldn't say as we had a lot of rats, sir, but I wouldn't say either as we never saw a rat. But wait a minute, sir, and I'll switch on the light. It's getting dusky in here."

Pyefinch walked along to the door by which the Guernseys' owner had come in and the last word in hygienic cowsheds was brightly illuminated.

"Primrose is certainly a most beautiful animal," observed Mr. Howe, peeping with admiration into the first stall.

"Beautiful udder, sir."

"Very beautiful. Very, very beautiful," Mr. Howe agreed in the hushed voice of him who gazes at one of nature's marvels.

"The teats be set so pretty, sir."

"Couldn't be better."

"And the inside be as good as the outside. Primrose and Marigold have a higher butter capacity than any of them."

"I quite believe it."

Mr. Howe leant over and patted Primrose's golden flanks encouragingly.

"Good Primrose! Pretty Primrose!" he crooned gently. At least that is what he intended to do, but the actual noise emitted resembled rather the squeak made by the tight lid of a wooden box when it is twisted round. Primrose turned her head and eyed him in gentle bovine astonishment.

"Artful, bean't they?" Pyefinch chuckled. "She knowed you was a-talking to her."

"Wouldn't you say that cows were every bit as intelligent as horses, Pyefinch?" Mr. Howe asked.

"I'd say they was a deal *more* intelligent," the cowman declared positively. "Look at Sunflower now. She knows we be admiring of Primrose and she won't be happy till we go and admire of her. Jealous? Jealous as ordinary women cows be."

"Are they?"

"That's a fact, sir. You may not believe it, but if I milk Buttercup before Crocus over there, Crocus'll do her level best not to give her milk proper. Reg'lar sulking you can call it."

"People don't appreciate the intelligence of cows."

"They don't, sir, and that's a mortal fact."

"I wish we could persuade her Ladyship to believe that cows are every bit as intelligent as horses, Pyefinch."

"Ah, I'm afeared we won't ever do that, sir. Her Ladyship be a main one for horses."

The Minister of Waste sighed.

"How's Bongo?" he asked.

"That's a good bull. I don't believe there be a better bull in the country. I reckon nothing in Guernseys will touch him at Islington in December."

"You think he'll win another Championship?"

"I'm sure on it, sir. As sure on it as I am we be a-talking together at this moment."

"Well, it'll be another great triumph for you, Pyefinch."

"You'd like to have a look at Bongo, wouldn't you, sir?"

"By all means."

Mr. Howe and Pyefinch walked along to the other end of the cow-house, passed out, and came to the residence of Champion Bongo of High Fettle.

"Blame it, the dratted light be gone wrong. There's times I say to myself it were better if they'd never gone

and invented this electricity. Will you wait here, sir? I'll go and fetch a lantern."

"I expect it's only the bulb which has fused. Haven't you got another?"

"Well, sir, I don't like to interfere with these electric lamps. Mr. Birchall don't like us to interfere either any more than I'd like him to interfere with my cows."

"Birchall went down to meet some people at the station."

"Yes, sir. But if I fetch my lantern you'll get a good view of Bongo. I won't keep you a minute, sir."

Pyefinch went off to his sanctum further along the yard, and the owner stood listening to the heavy breathing of his champion bull in the dusky stall.

Suddenly there was a loud sneeze which seemed to come from the vacant stall beside Bongo in which fodder was stacked.

"Who's there?" Mr. Howe asked sharply. "Is that you, Barrow?" Barrow was Pyefinch's assistant.

The answer to this challenge was a second sneeze, followed almost immediately by a third.

The Minister of Waste struck a match and held it over the entrance of the stall from which the noise had come. Like a barndoor fowl upon her nesting ground, he saw above a truss of hay a spectacled face with black whisk grimacing at him. He stepped back from the hideo vision in alarm and as he did so his match went out, and from the duskiness a distorted shape seemed to spring at him.

"Pyefinch! Barrow! Pyefinch! Pyefinch!" the Minister of Waste tried to shout, but his vocal chords were not made for effective shouting, and by the time Pyefinch came back with the lantern the intruder had vanished, and the sound of his scurrying footsteps died away round the gates of the yard.

"There was a man in here, Pyefinch."

"A man? What kind of a man, sir?"

"A man with black whiskers. It was the same face I saw staring at me last night from a car outside my house in Eaton Square."

"Do you think he was up to his mischief with Bongo, sir?"

"Bongo? It wasn't Bongo he wanted. It was me."

"Whatever for, sir?" Pyefinch gaped.

"He was concealed in the hay. Fortunately some of it must have got up his nose, and he gave himself away by sneezing."

"Ah, sure enough, hay'll make anyone sneeze sometimes if they start mucking it about."

"It looks to me, Pyefinch, very much like an attempt at assassination."

"That sounds bad, sir," said Pyefinch, who did not like the sound of any word he did not understand and suspected it of the worst.

"We'd better ring up the police at Eating."

"Which way did he go, sir?"

"He ran across the yard and out by the gate. Bring the lantern along. The ruffian may have dropped something."

He had. A little way down the lane which led up to the back of High Fettle they found a large cushion.

"Good god!" the Minister of Waste ejaculated. "He st have intended to smother me. What a mercy he e himself away by that sneeze! What an escape, Pyefinch. What an escape!"

"Bongo wouldn't have touched you, sir. There isn't a quieter animal not in all Sussex."

"I'm not talking about Bongo, Pyefinch," the Minister snapped a little irritably. "I'm talking about this Communist assassin."

"Oh, he were a Communist, were he? That's bad, that is. I don't like these Communists at all. A pretty pass the world have come to when a Communist can take a man's wife away from him without so much as a thank you."

"I don't think you quite realise, Pyefinch, that this ruffian wanted to murder me."

"To murder you, sir? Whatever would he want to do that for? I know these here Communists be rare bad 'uns, but that be carrying things a little too far, that be."

"Well, you'd better lock up the yard, Pyefinch. I'm going to tell Dawkins to ring up the police. Barrow must keep a good look-out for strangers round the place. These political fanatics will stick at nothing."

"So I see, sir," said Pyefinch, shaking his head sagaciously.

The Minister went back to the house.

"Dawkins, ring the police at Eating and tell them to send the best man they have up here at once."

"Very good, sir. I hope there hasn't been anything disagreeable going on in the farmyard, sir?"

"You see this cushion, Dawkins? Pyefinch and I found that cushion outside the farmyard."

"You don't say so, sir. Another small response to your broadcast, no doubt."

"*This* isn't waste material."

"No, sir, it seems to be in perfectly good order except for a speck or two of mud."

"This cushion was intended for my assassination, Dawkins."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir."

"The assassin was lurking among the hay in the stall next to Bongo. Pyefinch had gone for a lantern . . . by the way, tell Birchall to see to the bulb in the bul's shed . . . bulb I mean . . . I was waiting in the bull's shed for him to come back when I heard a tremendous sneeze. I thought at first it was Bongo. . . ."

"A very natural supposition, sir."

"Then I thought it might be Barrow. I said, 'Is that you, Barrow?' And there was another sneeze, followed immediately by a third."

"Dear me, a regular tornado, sir."

"I struck a match and saw the most horrible face I've ever seen staring at me out of the hay . . . a face with black whiskers and an appalling squint, and then my match went out. At that moment a shape sprang at me, but I threw myself on one side and shouted for Pyefinch. My action must have alarmed the assassin, who made for the gate of the farmyard as fast as he could run. When Pyefinch came back we went to look for him and found this cushion. You realise of course what he intended to do with it?"

"Not quite as clearly as I should wish, sir."

"He intended to smother me. Of course! It's obvious now. It was *he* who took the bulb out. That was a clever ruse, Dawkins, to lure Pyefinch away. He was going to steal on me unawares, smother me, and hide my body in the hay."

"Most shocking indeed, sir."

"But unfortunately for him he sneezed, and his surprise failed."

"I'll go and ring up Great Eating police-station at once, sir."

On his way to the telephone Dawkins looked into Mrs. Drakeford's room, where he found the housekeeper having a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Lavinia's maid.

"Her Ladyship never passed the remark to you, Miss Titley, that Mr. Howe was acting a bit strange these days?"

"No, Mr. Dawkins," said the lady's-maid, pursing up her already pursed mouth a little more. "But naturally though her Ladyship is quite exceptionally confidential with me she wouldn't go so far as to comment on Mr. Howe."

"You *couldn't* hardly expect her to do that, Mr. Dawkins," observed Mrs. Drakeford, whose plumpness contrasted with the angularity of Miss Titley.

"Certainly she did pass the remark it was a pity the B.B.C. had ever been invented," Titley admitted, "but

that was after we had all that trouble with the woman who brought the you-know-whats the day before yesterday. But why do you ask me such a question, Mr. Dawkins?"

"Nothing," said the butler. "I was just wondering about something, that's all."

He shut the door of the housekeeper's room and proceeded with a pensive expression on his smooth countenance toward the telephone.

It had been Mr. Apsley Howe's intention to walk dramatically into the Yellow Room where the week-end guests were still talking about horses and announce that an attempt had just been made to assassinate him, and in response to the exclamations of horror the news would evoke to fling the cushion down in the middle of the gathering and add laconically, 'with that!'

But as he reached the door he heard the resonant voice of that insufferable Blore woman shouting:

"I tell you, Lavinia, Tarara won't stay the extra furlong."

"I know she will. When she won at Ascot she was fit to run another mile."

"Look at the way she tailed off in the City and Suburban."

"She wasn't ready for that and she was over-handicapped."

"She'll never give Cabin Boy five pounds at Newmarket. You agree with me, Gaggles?"

Gaggles was the eleventh Earl of Feltham.

"I think Maisie right, Lavinia. I look at it this way . . ."

The Minister of Waste sighed. He really could not bear it when his young brother-in-law looked at anything in this way or that way. He put his head round the door.

"Lavinia, just a moment, please."

His wife curvetted through the chatter toward him.

"What's wrong, Apsley?" she asked, when the babble in the Yellow Room was slightly reduced in volume by the closing of the door. He held up the cushion.

"My god, they've not started unloading rubbish down here, have they?" Lady Lavinia neighed.

"No, no, but somebody apparently attempted to smother me."

"One of your constituents?"

"No, no," said the Minister fretfully. "I imagine it's either a Communist or an Irish Republican. I've told Dawkins to call up the Eating police." He gave an account of his adventure in the bull's-house.

"You must have dreamt it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Lavinia. You can't dream three sneezes."

"Well, if you will go in for this revolting wireless you must expect this kind of thing," she declared.

The Minister of Waste was glad he had not mentioned his talk in the Children's Hour on Monday.

"I think we ought to warn all the people in the house to be on the *qui vive* to-night."

"What for?"

"Well, there might be shooting or an infernal machine or anything. If this assassin followed me down here from London, he's not going to be deterred because he's dropped the cushion with which he planned to smother me."

"I'm not worrying at all," Lady Lavinia announced.

"Damn it, he's not trying to assassinate you," her husband protested.

"I tell you, I'm not worrying about this assassin," Lady Lavinia repeated.

And indeed her instinct was right, for at that moment Mr. Glegg was packing himself into his Baby Austin and preparing to leave Great Eating for Ben Nevis, Oaks Road, Hodford. After he ran out of the gate of the High Fettle farmyard to where the Baby Austin was parked just inside a field, leaving his hump behind him in the lane, he had driven back as fast as he could to the Blue Dragon, bent on a bold stroke.

Inspired by the loss of his hump he would disguise himself by getting rid of all that was left of his disguise, that is the whiskers and the grey flannel shirt. Then as himself in appearance but with the card of Henry Smith, the Sanitary Expert, he would call at High Fettle and try the effect of enquiring about a bath. Thus had the amateur detective dreamed on the way back to the Blue Dragon.

What was it which caused him on reaching the inn to rush upstairs with one hand shielding his face, to rush down again, fling his suitcase into the Baby Austin, himself after it, and steer for Hodford and home?

It was the sound of a familiar voice in the proprietor's office asking to be directed to the residence of Mr. Apsley Howe. Could his ears be deceiving him? He peeped cautiously through the crack of the door which was standing ajar. His ears had not deceived him. Nobody else would be wearing sugar-tongs in her back hair, nobody! And so not pausing to find out what his neighbour Miss Quekett wanted with the Minister of Waste, Mr Glegg had fled.

As the Baby Austin bounced along through the watery moonshine of that night at October's end, the amateur detective forgot all about the problem of the bath he had set himself to solve in the fresh problem of what had brought that idiotic neighbour of his to High Fettle. He was still meditating upon it when he reached Ben Nevis about ten o'clock.

"Who's that?" came the voice of Mrs. Pinches from the kitchen.

"It's me."

The kitchen door opened, and was immediately slammed to again as Mrs. Pinches hurriedly retreated behind it. There was a shrill twitter in the kitchen of excited female voices and the sound of a heavy article of furniture being dragged across the floor against the door. Mr. Glegg asked crossly what they thought they were doing in there. No answer was vouchsafed, but presently he

heard Mrs. Pinches telling Gladys to get out of the window and run for dear life to fetch the police.

"Oh, I daresn't, Mrs. Pinches. My legs wouldn't hold me," Gladys objected.

A female voice he did not recognise was heard to say she was surprised after all Mrs. Pinches had done for Gladys she wouldn't do a little thing like that for Mrs. Pinches in return.

"What's all this commotion about?" Mr. Glegg shouted.

"Oh, my god, Elsie Trotter, he's going to break in and murder the lot of us," Mrs. Pinches groaned. "Gladys, will you pull yourself together and fetch the police, you good-for-nothing girl."

"Gladys," urged the voice addressed as Elsie Trotter, "why don't you do what Mrs. Pinches says? Fancy a great girl like you being afraid to get out of a window."

"I'm not afraid to get out of the window, but supposing he chases after me?"

"I'd go myself if I weren't so worried about poor Miss Quekett," said Elsie Trotter, who Mr. Glegg now realised was the maid-of-all-work at Sans Souci.

"Have you all gone mad?" he shouted through the door. "Just because I come back on Saturday evening instead of Sunday. . . ."

"That's never you, Mr. Glegg?" his housekeeper quavered.

"Of course it's me. Who the devil do you think it is?"

The table was pulled back far enough for Mrs. Pinches to confirm the evidence of her ears. Then she slammed it to again, with a scream.

"Gladys, will you or will you not get out of that window and run and tell the police that the man who murdered Miss Quekett is in our front hall at this very moment?"

Gladys started to sob.

"But if it's him who murdered Miss Quekett he'll murder me too," she howled.

"What's anyone want to murder you for, you stupid girl?" Mrs. Pinches scoffed.

"And anyway we don't know Miss Quekett *has* been murdered, do we?" Elsie Trotter asked.

"Certainly we don't," said Mrs. Pinches. "It's only that garshly face looking at me put murder into my head. It may not be a murderer at all. It may be just an escaped lunatic."

"That won't stop him chasing me down Oaks Road," Gladys sobbed.

"Really, you make anyone ashamed, Gladys. What is there to be frightened of?"

"I'd go myself," said Elsie Trotter, "if I wasn't so tired trapesing down to the station to see if Miss Quekett's come by every train."

How was he going to persuade these hysterical women that . . . suddenly he remembered his whiskers. In the absorption of the new problem created by Miss Quekett's arrival in Great Eating he had forgotten to remove his whiskers. With the courage demanded of men who have to clear their faces of false hair he whipped off the whiskers, heedless of the smart, and crammed them into the pocket of his overcoat.

"Mrs. Pinches," he said, "I'm sorry to hear from your conversation that our neighbour Miss Quekett is causing anxiety, but I really must ask you to open this door and get me some supper as soon as possible. I've had a long drive and am very hungry."

Again the door opened cautiously for Mrs. Pinches to peer out.

"Why, it is you, Mr. Glegg!"

"Who on earth else would it be?"

"But I didn't reckonise you when you first come in, Mr. Glegg. You looked different somehow. I've got Miss Quekett's Elsie in. Miss Quekett hasn't been seen since early morning when she went off with an armful of flowers and an enamel slop-pail. She was away all Thurs-

day too, but she did get back by the 9.45. Poor Elsie doesn't know what she'd better do about it."

Mr. Glegg with all his curiosity was kindhearted at bottom, and he found it difficult not to relieve Elsie's anxiety by telling her that Miss Quekett was at the Blue Dragon Inn. However, he reminded himself that if it were known that he had been in Great Eating this evening he might be identified as the man in the High Fettle farm-yard, and thrusting his hands into the pockets of his overcoat he told Elsie not to worry because Miss Quekett was bound to be all right.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Glegg, to say so, but I'm always nervous what she'll do when she starts putting the silver in her hair. She stuck a couple of teaspoons in on Thursday, and to-day she went off with the sugar-tongs. It was the same last year when we went to Cromer. It was teaspoons then, and she got into trouble for keeping on turning head over heels on the sands. The children used to follow her about everywhere. It made me feel very uncomfortable."

"Don't worry, Elsie," said Mr. Glegg, taking his hand from his pocket to pat her shoulder in fatherly fashion.

"Oh, my gracious, what ever's that animal in your hand?" cried Mrs. Pinches.

Mr. Glegg hastily put his hand back in his pocket and tried to rub the whiskers off.

"You're seeing things to-night, I'm afraid, Mrs. Pinches. There's no animal. Well, get me a bite of supper as quickly as you can."

He retired from the kitchen to his den, where he burnt the whiskers in the grate.

"I hope he isn't going the way of your Miss Quekett, Elsie Trotter," said Mrs. Pinches gravely.

"Oh dear, I hope not, poor soul," Elsie condoled.

"It wasn't an animal, Mrs. Pinches. It was a lot of black hair," said Gladys.

"That's quite enough from you, Gladys. After the

poppy-show you made of yourself just now the less you say the better. Can I smell burning?"

"It smells like hair burning," Gladys muttered sulkily.

"What's taken the girl?" demanded Mrs. Pinches. "She's got hair on the brain to-night. Go in and lay the table for Mr. Glegg. More trouble than they're worth, that's what girls are," Mrs. Pinches sighed to Elsie Trotter when Gladys was out of the kitchen. "I wonder wherever Miss Quekett can be."

"Well, if she doesn't come back by to-morrow morning I'll have to go to the police. Oh dear, it'll be awful all alone at Sans Souci to-night."

"I'll send Gladys back to sleep with you."

"Oh, that would be kind of you, if Gladys doesn't mind."

"It's not her place to mind," Mrs. Pinches proclaimed sternly.

At this moment the burly form of a policeman knocked at the door of Ben Nevis. Gladys, peeping from the dining-room window, saw the helmet of the law and came running into the kitchen.

"It's the police, Mrs. Pinches," she gasped.

"You wait there, Gladys, I'll go to the door," said the housekeeper.

But she went first to Mr. Glegg's den.

"It's the police," she breathed hoarsely. "Have you got anything more to burn?"

Mr. Glegg stared.

"You've been a good employer, Mr. Glegg, these five years. I couldn't wish for a better, and if you want to get away I'll keep the police busy for a bit. I don't know what you done, but that's neither here nor there when anyone's in trouble."

"You mean well, Mrs. Pinches, but you're being rather ridiculous. Go and see what the policeman wants. Is it that obstinate booby Stubbs?"

It was P.C. Stubbs who had come to let Elsie Trotter

know that the police at Great Eating in Sussex had telephoned asking for a responsible person to be sent to take charge of Miss Quekett and see that she returned to her house.

"You ought to be more careful about letting her go gadding off by herself, Elsie Trotter," he said. "She's been pestering a Cabinet Minister now."

"Not the one who spoke on the wireless last Wednesday?" Elsie asked.

"Mr. Apsley Howe?"

"That's him. Oh, she was mad about him. Said he had a voice like a lovely cherub in Paradise and I don't know what not. She took him a present of some . . . of some . . ."

"Some what?"

"Some things we had put away at Sans Souci. He asked over the wireless for everybody to rout about and send him anything they'd got. Mr. Burge and Mrs. Chicksands and some of them sent him a lot of old iron, but Miss Quekett thought he'd rather have china. It wasn't my fault, constable."

"China, eh? Well, this wasn't china. This was enamel, and full of daisies."

"And she only bought that slop-pail last week!"

"You'd better take the first train you can get tomorrow and bring her home," P.C. Stubbs advised.

Chapter Eighteen

BACK TO GLENBOGLE

WHILE he was dressing on that Sunday morning Hufam blessed the extra touch of peace by which even the normal stillness of remote Glenbogle was hallowed. In this Sabbatarian fastness he could feel safe from the bath and stove, and if he got away to Glasgow early on Monday morning he would escape their arrival here. Nor was the perambulator likely to reach Glenbogle before he left. No doubt it had been routed out of Nobbs' Bottom by that horrid little hyena of a paper-works manager. No doubt it was his idea of a cheap retort to the despatch to him of the bath and stove. But how had Perkins managed to muddle the disposal of *them*? Probably he had been overbearing with his brother-in-law and been refused accommodation for them at Tottenden. It was clear from Gertrude's telegram that the perambulator had put more ideas into her head. That fantastic notion about his keeping another woman must have recurred to her. Well, well, this was what happened when Ministers of the Crown insisted on broadcasting. This ill-informed sneering at red tape by harum-scarum journalists! They did not realise that the red tape of the Civil Service was as much a protection to the national dignity as the red tunics of the Guards. If the Permanent Officials of the Ministry had succeeded in stopping the Minister's broadcast, no doubt there would have been a cry that red tape was responsible. These people who denounced red tape did not have the job of cleaning up the mess when the red tape was cut through. Red Tape, White Behaviour, and Blue Water, that was the British Empire, and each of the three was indispensable to its lasting might and glory. *Tria juncta in uno*. Like the crowns in the Order of the

Bath. And how significant it was that the ribbon of the Order pre-eminently intended to reward the Services Fighting and Civil should be a rich shade of red. Huffam was shaving during these reflections and carried his enthusiastic symbolism a little too far by nicking a neat diminutive oblong of red upon the cheekbone nearer to his heart.

When he reached the dining-room he found his host stamping up and down with a bowl of porridge.

"Ah, there you are! Beautiful day for our drive! Have some porridge. Hullo, you've cut yourself."

"Yes, I don't know how I managed to do that."

"You use a safety-razor, I expect?"

"I do."

"Dangerous brutes! I won't use a safety-razor. Tried one once and nearly cut the lobe of my ear off. I wouldn't take your porridge to the table, Huffam. Always eat your porridge walking about."

"Why?"

"Time-honoured custom. But the porridge of to-day doesn't deserve honouring. It's these damned fine-ground Midlothian oats. Hullo, Hugh, good-morning! I was just saying to Huffam that the porridge of to-day is no good."

The Laird of Kilwhillie nodded, and ladled a generous helping into his bowl which he walked up and down blowing, his long drooping moustaches swaying in the draught like seaweed in the tide.

"Beautiful day for our drive," Ben Nevis barked.

"It'll turn to rain, I think," Kilwhillie said, cocking a bilious eye at the hills.

He was right. By the time he and Huffam and Ben Nevis were packed in the Daimler after attending Morning Service held at nine by the Reverend Ninian Fletcher the sky was overcast, and before they had emerged from dark Glenbogle on the main road the rain was coming down in a drench.

"Pity!" Ben Nevis commented. "You don't see the country at its best in rain like this."

This was true. The view from the car could have been bettered by somebody sitting at the bottom of a swimming-pool.

"I wonder if it will last?" said Huffam.

"I doubt if it'll stop all day," Kilwhillie replied. "But I think we'll stick to our programme, don't you, Donald?"

"Yes, yes. If we let a drop of rain interfere with our programmes we shouldn't get anything done."

"And I think we ought to see the dumping-grounds I have arranged for at Ardgour and Strontian even if we can't get as far as Acharacle or Kilchoan. Even so we won't see Morvern and Mull."

But the plans of the Area Controller of Waste for Wester Inverness with part of North Argyll were baffled by the ferry across Loch Linnhe, which was not working. This meant that the car would have to drive right round by Kinlochiel both ways, thus adding about sixty miles to the Oban expedition.

"It's not good enough, Hugh," declared Ben Nevis. "It simply isn't good enough."

Cameron though he was, Kilwhillie could not but agree with the Regional Controller that the road on the other side of Lochiel would be unendurable in such weather, and that to drive it twice in one day was out of the question.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Ben Nevis. "Instead of taking the ferry at Ballachulish we'll drive round by Kinlochleven and Glencoe to Oban. Then we can come back through Appin. I think Huffam ought to see Glencoe."

"There was a massacre there once, wasn't there?" the visitor asked.

"The Campbells massacred the MacDonalds," said Ben Nevis, his eagle's beak darkening.

"And we'll see what Drumtucket is doing about the

waste from the new road," said Kilwhillie. "It'll be interesting to compare what he's doing there with what we're doing along Loch Ness side."

"Very little, I should imagine," said Ben Nevis scornfully.

Glencoe on a flawless June day is sombre enough: on a wet day at the shutting in of October it plumbs the depths of melancholy grandeur. As they stood surveying the dripping precipices across a litter of hideous crinkled tins which had contained the tar for the new road, Huffam recalled line after line of Ovid's *Tristia*, but did not quote them in case his guides should suppose he was showing off.

"And this," Ben Nevis declared, "comes within the Region of the Controller of Waste for the Lowlands! I ask you, Huffam, if that was a reasonable decision by the Ministry?"

"You mustn't ask me to express an opinion, I'm afraid," said the representative of Whitehall. "My mission is to obtain the various points of view that affect the situation."

"But at least we can count upon you to put before Sir Claud Huntbath in the strongest terms the iniquity . . ."

"Iniquity," Kilwhillie echoed.

"The iniquity . . ."

"Iniquity," Kilwhillie re-echoed.

"The iniquity of allotting country like this to the Lowlands?" Ben Nevis managed to conclude.

"Iniquity is perhaps rather a strong word . . ."

"Not too strong," said Ben Nevis firmly.

"Not a bit too strong," Kilwhillie agreed.

"But I may be able to suggest that there may be a certain lack of appropriateness in the arrangement," Huffam promised. "And perhaps the Department which carefully considered the question of the most convenient division to adopt for the two Scottish Regions might be induced to bear in mind the possibility of introducing certain modifications in the existing arrangement which

might tend to a more equitable—I don't think I am using too strong a word, but I will risk that—a more equitable distribution of certain Zones and Areas. I must not go further than that, for Sir Claud would not wish me to go further. However, if a formula can be found by which the relation of Argyll to the division as a whole can be adjusted I have no doubt whatever that it will be found, and I can certainly promise you on my own responsibility that the position of Glencoe will be noted and borne in mind."

Kilwhillie kicked one of the degraded empty tar-containers beside the road.

"You won't find any of those swollen concertinas lying about in the part of Argyll that comes within my Control," he observed bitterly.

"And I hope you'll make some remark about them to Drumtucket if you meet him to-morrow, as you probably will," Ben Nevis barked.

"Bound to," said Kilwhillie. "He never lets Peebles out of his sight if he can help it."

"After all, waste material like this hasn't to wait for a pamphlet from the Ministry before it can be gathered and classified. Every one of my Area Controllers has this kind of thing well in hand."

"Working of course in close collaboration with County Councils," said Huffam.

"Just so. However, what can you expect of a Campbell?" Ben Nevis demanded.

"What indeed?" Kilwhillie added. "As they were in the beginning, so they are now and ever shall be, world without end."

To Huffam's relief, for by now a conduit in the collar of his burberry was leading a steady flow of rain down his neck, the MacDonald chieftain and the Cameron laird decided that the villainies of the Campbells had been sufficiently denounced for the present, and the party climbed up into the Daimler again to continue the journey to Oban.

Here Huffam spent an absorbing couple of hours with Mr. MacDonald, the District Controller of Waste, who was too capable an official to allow his desire to bring Argyll under the sway of a chieftain of his own clan to be too apparent to the Whitehall representative. Huffam thoroughly enjoyed himself in disentangling the complicated orders, counter-orders, rules, exceptions, sections, sub-sections, paragraphs, sub-paragraphs, clauses and schedules which the great scheme of the Ministry of Waste had already produced, and to which an immense number would be added week by week as the scheme swelled into full bureaucratic majesty, but the reader might not enjoy the details of that discussion as much as Huffam.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, Mr. MacDonald," he said, putting away his notebook. "I feel much better qualified now to envisage the Control of Waste in the Highlands and Islands as an organic whole. This talk with you has been most helpful, and has indeed cleared up so many points that I feel much more optimistic about achieving a formula that will be satisfactory to both sides."

"The main point I'll be glad for you to bear in mind, Mr. Huffam, is this feeling in Oban about Inverness. If you could make it clear to Sir Claud that it will be pairrfectly easy to prevent any friction by seeing that no orders are issued to Oban from Inverness, but always directly from the Ministry itself, I don't believe you'll have any more petitions from Oban. That's in confidence, mind."

It rained even harder on the way back through Appin, and though Huffam did not imagine it was possible for it to rain harder, it did succeed after the Ballachulish ferry had been crossed in raining still harder all the way back to Glenbogle.

It was the next morning, when the Daimler was passing Loch na Craosnaich on the way to catch the train from Fort William to Glasgow, that Huffam said to his host, who was determined to lose no opportunity of feeding

him up to the last moment before the meeting with the Regional Controller of the Lowlands:

"By the way, Ben Nevis, if a bath and a triple-burner paraffin-stove turn up at Glenbogle, will you hand them over to Mr. Bayne at Spean Bridge?"

"A bath and a paraffin-stove?" Ben Nevis repeated in astonishment. "But why should a bath and a paraffin-stove turn up in Glenbogle?"

"I didn't want to bother you because I was hoping to hear that the mistake had been rectified. However, I've had no further information and must now presume that the two articles are on their way to Glenbogle. I shall not be violating any departmental secret if I tell you that we have lately been experimenting at the Ministry with the rapid evacuation of waste material for which no suitable employment is immediately apparent. By a misreading of his instructions a minor official supposed that a bath and a triple-burner paraffin-stove which should have been evacuated in the Home Counties Region were forwarded to me. I do not know whether the carriage has already been paid, but if you would instruct Mr. Bayne at Spean Bridge to recoup you, he will be able to reclaim from the Financial Department at the Ministry. However, he will know all about the necessary procedure, and so I hope you will not be put to any great trouble in the matter."

"But what is to be done with this bath and stove?" the Chieftain asked.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing whatever. They are waste material for which the Experimental Department of the Ministry has not up to the present discovered any suitable employment. As such they come under the heading of Static Waste Material, about which you received a leaflet informing you how such material should be dealt with. This laid down that nothing was to be done with such waste material pending any further decisions that may be taken about its employment. It will all be classified in due

course. The Ministry is now engaged in selecting a special body of inspectors for such a purpose, who will grade what is known as Static Waste Material into degrees of uselessness."

"It sounds a very carefully thought out scheme," Ben Nevis observed.

"We *are* very pleased with it," Huffam said modestly. "We've been working at it now for over six months."

"So we do nothing with this bath and stove, eh?"

"Nothing whatever. Mr. Bayne will have to fill up a few forms, but he will know exactly what to do. I'm extremely sorry there has been this little misunderstanding, but misunderstandings do occur sometimes, however careful we are to provide for every possible contingency."

"What kind of bath is it?" Ben Nevis asked thoughtfully.

"It's rather a large bath."

"I raised the question because I was thinking of putting a bath in the beaters' bothy and I wondered if this bath could be used. If it could, I would pay the carriage of course."

"The chief thing against it as a bath is that it has a large hole in the bottom of it."

"Ah, then that means it wouldn't hold water, eh?"

"I'm afraid not."

"What a pity! And the stove? Could that be used in this bothy?"

"I cannot claim to be an authority on paraffin-stoves, but my impression was that it was definitely past use."

"Pity!"

"Yes, it is a pity, but we have to steel ourselves at the Ministry against might-have-beens."

"Naturally, naturally. You have to take the practical view. A Government Department can't afford to indulge in sentiment."

"After all, we *are* the servants of the public, and as such a rigid utilitarian outlook is expected of us."

"Well, they always say the British Civil Service is the finest in the world, and by Jove, Huffam, they're right. I'm not much good at compliments. I mean to say I'm a plain-spoken sort of chap, what? And I hope you won't think I'm trying to flatter you or any of that sort of nonsense when I say I think it's marvellous the way you've grasped the vital necessity of getting Argyll out of the Lowlands Region and putting it with the Highlands and Islands."

"Remember I'm meeting Lord Peebles in Glasgow and that I shall have to represent his point of view to Sir Claud as well as yours."

"Oh, I know, I know, and he'll have George Campbell with him, I expect. Mind you, I don't want to prejudice you against George. He's greedy and grasping and completely unscrupulous. In fact he's typical Campbell. But he's an awfully nice fellow personally. You'll like him very much. Hugh Cameron dislikes him. But there are private reasons for that. Well, I'm not giving away a secret when I say that the girl Hugh wanted to marry married George Campbell instead. It made poor Hugh a bit of a misonygist—wait a minute, that's not the word I want—misogynist, misogynist, that's it. Did you notice that moustache of his?"

"Oh yes, I did. Definitely."

"I think he grew that to show he wasn't interested in ladies any longer. But he's a grand chap is Kilwhillie. I put him at the top of all my Area Controllers, and if Sir Andrew Fraser of Dunfiddle resigns from the Zonal Control—and I hope to god he will, for he's a pompous nincompoop, and I don't know why on earth the Ministry ever gave him the job—I shall put in a strong recommendation that Hugh Cameron of Kilwhillie should succeed Dunfiddle. If you see a chance to put in a word for Kilwhillie, Huffam, I know you'll do it. He was heartbroken, poor chap, he couldn't show you his arrangements in Ardgour and Ardnamurchan. He's got a scheme for

getting the school-children along the coast to collect these green glass balls that get washed ashore from the nets. We do want to get the children in on this waste business."

"Yes, but not just yet," said Huffam quickly. "The Minister is very keen on that, but Sir Claud wants to get the full benefit of the adult response to our pamphlet before we bring the children into it."

"But he wouldn't object to Kilwhillie's putting the children on to collecting these glass balls—they've probably got a technical name, but I don't know what it is?"

"Not in the least, I'm sure, provided that no extra strain is thrown upon the District Controllers for the present. Private enterprise among children may be encouraged when under suitable supervision, but we do not want to do anything yet that would seem like authorising children to play a semi-official part. The whole question of valuable fields for children's activity is being carefully considered now by the General Services and Establishments Department, and it is hoped to produce a fruitful scheme early in the New Year. Such appropriate activities as the collection of wool that sheep leave on barbed wire, the rescue of milk-bottle stoppers, and even a drive against the waste of wild fruits by casual picking and eating, are all being examined from every angle. I'll make a note of these glass balls. What are they used for exactly?"

"As buoys for the fishing-nets."

"I see, and I suppose they wouldn't be much use for anything else?"

"I know one fellow who used them to light his lavatory window."

"That was certainly ingenious."

"I don't know, Huffam, I think a muslin curtain's less trouble. No, my idea was to use them again for their original purpose."

Huffam looked doubtful.

"We don't want to upset the glass-blowing interests by entering into direct competition and lowering prices. However, there can be no harm in collecting these glass balls. Their future can be settled later. After all, they can always be listed under one of the headings of Static Waste Material."

"Exactly. Well, here we are in Fort William. And you're in capital time for your train. I'll just ask if this bath and stove have turned up."

Enquiries by the Chieftain were unsuccessful in tracing any news of the bath and stove, but about five minutes before the train left, when at the door of his guest's compartment Ben Nevis was impressing on him for the last time the need of shutting his mind to the many insidious arguments with which Lord Peebles and Sir George Campbell of Drumtucket would try to corrupt it, a porter came hurrying along the platform. The Chieftain turned away to hear his news.

"You would be expecting a bath, Ben Nevis?" he asked, all the soft air of the west in his accents.

"We were, yes."

"There's no bath, Ben Nevis, but there's a perambulator just arrived for Glenbogle."

"A what?"

"A perambulator."

"Look here, Duncan, you're not mixing up a bath with a perambulator, are you?"

"No, no, Ben Nevis, it's a perambulator, right enough. It's on wheels. You'd never be seeing the like of a bath on wheels."

The Chieftain hurried away with Duncan to check his information.

"Don't let the train start till I've checked up on something," he shouted to the stationmaster as he passed.

Huffam, wondering what had taken his host off in such excitement, opened the *Glasgow Herald* and idly turned the pages. Suddenly his pale cheeks went paler, and he very

nearly ran true to fictional form by letting the newspaper fall from his nerveless grip. At the top of the column headed Wireless Programme he had read the sub-heading 'Minister of Waste will speak in the Children's Hour.'

At that moment the head of Ben Nevis, more florid than usual from the exertion of running up the platform, thrust itself through the window of the compartment.

"It's all right, Huffam. We've got it in."

"Got what in?"

"The perambulator. It's in the luggage-van. You'll have to see about it when you get to Queen Street. They charge you at the same rate as a bicycle. I hadn't time to get a ticket."

"But it's waste material, static waste material," Huffam protested feebly. This on top of the announcement in the *Glasgow Herald* was too much.

"No, no, this isn't a bath. I went along to make sure. It's a splendid perambulator. Your wife will be delighted with it. I see you wrote 'A Present from Ben Nevis' on the label. The station people thought it was a present from me."

Above the Chieftain's laughter, gusty as the wind in one of his own corries, shrilled the guard's whistle. The train began to move out of the station.

"Don't let yourself be bamboozled by Peebles and Drumtucket. We're counting on you. So much enjoyed your visit. You must look us up again soon. Good-bye."

Huffam waved limply as the train left Mac 'ic Eachainn upon his native heath, and sat back in a gloom to which in due course the immense desolation of the Moor of Rannoch provided a fitting accompaniment.

It was idle to think of getting into a taxi when he reached Queen Street and leaving that infernal perambulator behind him. A piece of luggage might be successfully abandoned, but the railways had accorded to the perambulator the recognition of a ticket. Ben Nevis would have warned the guard that it was his perambu-

lator, and the guard would expect him to honour his obligations not merely by taking a ticket for it but by tipping him into the bargain. To abandon a perambulator partook, owing to this idiotic recognition of it by the railway companies as something semi-human, of abandoning a child. Yes, he would have to walk along the platform at Queen Street with a porter wheeling that accursed perambulator behind him to deposit it in the left-luggage office, and at King's Cross to-morrow morning he would have to see it wheeled along to a taxi. And there was a label on it addressed to him. A label? What was it Ben Nevis had said about the label? A Present from Ben Nevis. Who had written that? Gertrude presumably. But no! Of course that was the preposterous name of the villa in which that vile little busybody of a paper-works manager lived. Of course! Of course! The odious little hyena had rooted about in Nobbs' Bottom and sent this disgusting perambulator to Chillingham Gardens from Ben Nevis, Oaks Road, Hodford. It would be easy enough to reassure Gertrude. Certainly it would involve mixing his official with his private life, which was distasteful, but that was unavoidable. Yet even when Gertrude's suspicions had been allayed there would remain the problem of getting rid of the perambulator. Why had he shirked telling Ben Nevis that as well as the bath and stove he might expect a perambulator instead of counting on its not arriving before he left Glenbogle and planning to telegraph instructions for Bayne the District Controller to deal with it under Section 3, Sub-section B, Paragraph iv of the leaflet about Static Waste Material? But even if the final disposal of the perambulator should prove less of a problem than he feared, what new and insoluble problems might not be created by this broadcast in the Children's Hour? The few minutes he had heard of the Children's Hour on the rare occasions when he had turned on the six o'clock news prematurely had not left him with the impression that the Children's Hour was a shining

feature of contemporary life. People calling themselves Uncles and Aunts apparently gambolled coyly with one another and there was always a surfeit of good-nights. His Chief was quite capable of thinking he ought to gambol and blow kisses and assume a cotside manner. He had no children of his own, which might tempt him into a more debasing exhibition of avunculism than usual. And what was he going to invite children to do? His head had been turned by what he believed was the success of his broadcast last Wednesday; but most of that had been written for him. The unfortunate peroration he had added would probably dictate the style of the whole talk. He must have been composing it during the week-end at High Fettle. He would not have dared to tell his wife what he was doing, but would he have been able to resist telling them at the Ministry? And in that case would the Permanent Secretary have taken a firm line and insisted on having his talk written out for him by his own private secretary. Or would he have given the job to Charles Upwey? But it was idle to speculate. Somehow he must listen to this performance. He must know the worst before he took the train from Queen Street to-night.

Huffam started the crossword puzzle in the *Glasgow Herald* in an attempt to distract his mind from the perambulator and his Chief's talk in the Children's Hour.

Chapter Nineteen

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

"THE bairns'll likely be in anither compartment?" the porter at Queen Street asked, when Huffam had settled matters with the guard.

"The what? Oh, the children, you mean? No, I have no children with me."

"Wull I put the perambulator on top of a taxi?"

Huffam was seized with a longing to present the perambulator to the porter, but caution forbade the gesture. The man would be so surprised that before he knew where he was he might find himself suspected of having thrown his child out of the train on the Moor of Rannoch.

"No, I want to put it in the left-luggage office."

"Verra guid, sir. It's a bonny perambulator."

Again Huffam was seized with that wild longing to give the beastly conveyance away, but once again he was deterred by the cultivated caution of years.

After leaving his suitcase and the perambulator at the luggage office he drove to the Central Hotel and enquired if there was a message for him from Lord Peebles. There was a note.

Spoons House,
Battermuir, N.B.
Sunday.

Dear Mr. Huffam,

I have heard from Sir Claud Huntbath that you have been visiting the Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands at Glenbogle, and that he is anxious you should have an opportunity to hear my views about the proposal to place the whole of Argyll in his region. I am therefore sending my car to the Central Hotel at 2.30 to fetch you to Spoons. I should suggest your coming to lunch, but fancy that the train from Fort William will make it rather late for you.

I take it that you will be returning to London by the night train. We can give you an early dinner and send you back in good time to Glasgow.

Yours most truly,

Peebles

I have asked Sir George Campbell, my Area Controller for Argyll, to meet you.

Huffam had lunch at the Central, and at half-past two set out in Lord Peebles' Sunbeam to Spoons House, which was reached at four o'clock.

The Regional Controller of Waste for the Lowlands was a small dried-up man in the fifties, with very bright shrewd eyes and a thin but humorous mouth.

"I'm sorry to drag you all this way, Mr. Huffam, but I thought we could talk matters over more comfortably here than in a Glasgow club or hotel. This is Sir George Campbell of Drumtucket."

Huffam looked with interest at one whose name he had heard being reviled in the heart of Glencoe. He saw a big fellow with fair hair, small blue eyes, a rugged face, and the large mouth that Ben Nevis and Kilwhillie had warned him was the recognised feature of the Campbell greed.

"So you've been up in the wilds of Inverness with Donald MacDonald, eh? Was my friend Hugh Cameron there?"

"Yes, he was there."

"He would be," Drumtucket guffawed.

"Well, what about going to my room and getting down to business?" Lord Peebles asked.

Huffam was impressed by this room. The books on the shelves looked like books that were there to be read, and busts of Sophocles, Socrates, Alexander the Great, Hadrian and Julius Caesar suggested that his host had at the worst a sentimental respect for a classical education.

"What I understand my friend Ben Nevis wants is to remove the whole of Argyll from my Region into his."

"Insane proposal!" Drumtucket spluttered.

"Now, wait a minute, George. You mustn't prejudice Mr. Huffam at the start by a display of impenetrability. Of course, Sir George and I both of us recognise that Argyll is Highland. But then so is Perthshire, and I understand that my colleague makes no claim for Perthshire. On the other hand, in Scotland we do not consider Aberdeen a part of the Highlands, and Aberdeen is included in that Region."

"The whole trouble comes from giving Donald MacDonald that bit of North Argyll," Sir George Campbell put in. "We have much more reason to resent that than they have to resent the rest of Argyll coming under us."

"Now don't work yourself up, George," Lord Peebles put in. "What Mr. Huffam wants to ascertain for the Ministry is the practical benefit of any change. I think I am interpreting your desire accurately, Mr. Huffam?"

"That is exactly the reason which led Sir Claud to send me up to Scotland."

"You see, he and I stand outside these traditional feuds. We are only concerned with the practical benefit of any change in the existing arrangement."

"Is it practical to put the whole of Argyll under Ben Nevis?" Sir George demanded. "Damn it, Hamish, they haven't got the railway facilities up there. They haven't even got a railway between Fort William and Inverness. The whole scheme is a monstrous piece of MacDonald and Cameron land-grabbing. I can't tell you what a nuisance Hugh Cameron is making of himself. Every single order I issue for Argyll he takes a delight in counter-ordering for the part of it which has been included in the Area Control of Wester Inverness."

But enough of this! If Huffam found himself in a nightmare jigsaw puzzle none of the pieces of which would fit, that was Huffam's job as an official of the Ministry of Waste.

At a quarter to five Lady Peebles came in to ask if they

weren't coming to tea which was waiting for them in the Blue Drawing-room.

"You look as if you needed some tea, Mr. Huffam. Have you settled your little difficulty, Hamish?" she turned to ask her husband.

"I think we've managed to put our point of view before Mr. Huffam."

"We've done our best, Margaret," said Sir George.

"Ben Nevis is such a capital fellow," Lord Peebles went on, "that I sympathise with Mr. Huffam over not liking to disappoint him. Still, we must be practical."

"And there's been enough criticism already over that," Sir George insisted. "Why? Because Donald MacDonald is completely unpractical, like all those Inverness-shire lairds. They talk a great deal, but when it comes to doing anything they can only groan about the burden on the rates."

"Now don't start again, George," said Lady Peebles. "Do let poor Mr. Huffam have his tea."

At ten minutes past five Huffam remembered what was happening at the B.B.C.

"Have you a wireless set, Lady Peebles?" he asked.

"I really don't know. Have we, Hamish?"

"They've probably got one in the servants' hall. Why?"

Huffam, blushing for his Chief, revealed what he was proposing to do.

"Oh well, I think we ought to listen to that," said Lord Peebles, rising to ring the bell.

When the butler came in he asked him if there was such a thing as a wireless set in the house.

"They have a Pye in the servants' hall, my lord."

"A pie, Bagshaw?" exclaimed Lady Peebles. "How delicious!"

"A Pye, my lady, is the name of a certain make of wireless set."

"Could we borrow it, Bagshaw?"

"I'm afraid it's not a portable, my lord."

"We'd have to go to the servants' hall to hear it?"

"That is so, my lord."

"You don't mind coming along to the servants' hall, Huffam?"

"Not a bit."

"George, are you coming? I think we ought to hear what Howe has to say."

"I'm coming too, Hamish," Lady Peebles declared. "Dear me, what fun this is! I never expected all this excitement, Mr. Huffam. We lead such a quiet life at Spoons."

"With your permission, my lord," said the butler, "I'll go and prepare the servants' hall for your reception. What exactly were you wishing to hear, sir?" he turned to ask Huffam.

"The Children's Hour."

"Very good, sir. I'll see that everything is in order for the Children's Hour, my lord."

The butler bowed and left the room, the fine lines of his deportment unblurred by the task he had been set.

Three minutes later he returned.

"The Children's Hour has commenced, my lord. Uncle Jumbo and Aunt Matty are superintending a new game at the moment."

"I can't say how thrilled I am," Lady Peebles laughed as she led the way out of the Blue Drawing-room. "This is quite the most exciting thing I've done for ages. What a splendid guest you are, Mr. Huffam!"

When they reached the servants' hall from which every member of the staff at Spoons House had been evacuated by the majestic Bagshaw, Lord Peebles looked round him with frank admiration.

"What a jolly room, Margaret!" he exclaimed. "I never knew we had as jolly a room as this at Spoons."

Lady Peebles put a finger to her lips.

"Hamish dear, they're talking in the wireless-box. You mustn't interrupt them, poor things."

Lord and Lady Peebles and their two guests seated themselves in the comfortable old armchairs which the butler had arranged in a semicircle round the Pye.

"What did Bagshaw call this Punch and Judy theatre?" Lord Peebles asked.

"A pie, Hamish," his wife whispered.

"When the pie was opened the birds began to sing, eh?"

"Hamish dear, you really mustn't talk. Mr. Huffam wants to hear what's being said by the wireless-box."

"And now, children, have you all got your handkerchiefs ready?" Aunt Matty was asking. "Uncle Jumbo's waiting to tell you what you have to do."

"Hullo, children," came a carefully jovial voice. "All set? Now first of all spread your handkerchief out on your knees or on a small table."

"Get your handkerchief out, George," said Lord Peebles, "we must be in on this. Come along, Huffam."

Huffam wondered to himself what qualities in Lord Peebles had made Sir Claud Huntbath think him a suitable person to control waste in one of the two Scottish regions. However, he did not want to appear aggressively adult in the face of such childishness, and he spread his handkerchief like the others.

"Now take the top right-hand corner between your thumb and first finger . . ." Uncle Jumbo continued.

"Sometimes called the index finger," Aunt Matty put in primly.

"Thank you, Matty. Have you all got the top right-hand corner of your handkerchiefs between your thumb and first finger, often called the index finger as Aunt Matty reminds us? Now fold the handkerchief over, bringing the top right-hand corner exactly over the bottom left-hand corner."

"This is rather complicated," Lord Peebles commented, his tongue peeping anxiously between his lips.

"Very complicated indeed," Sir George agreed. "I can't think who that woman's voice reminds me of . . ."

"Now every handkerchief should look like a triangle," Uncle Jumbo continued. "You all know what a triangle is, I hope."

"I hope so," Lord Peebles murmured. "It would gravely reflect on Mr. Forster's Education Act if they didn't."

"Mine doesn't look much like a triangle," said Sir George. "Nor does yours, Hamish. Mr. Huffam is more of a dab at this than we are."

"Steady, George, we shall miss the next move if you keep interrupting," Lord Peebles warned him.

"Now, you've all got your triangles, I hope?" Uncle Jumbo asked with bright optimism.

"I haven't," said Lady Peebles to the loud-speaker. "Oh dear, I was forgetting he couldn't hear me."

"Now take the apex of the triangle between the thumb and first or index finger of the left hand—left, mind, and fold it back to a point in the middle of the triangle."

"What's the apex, Hamish?" Sir George whispered.

"The point."

"But there are three points," Sir George objected.

"The top point."

"I think this fellah ought to explain what an apex is," Sir George grumbled.

"Hush! he is."

"The apex of the triangle, of course, is the point on the left where you brought the right-hand top corner over first of all. Got that?"

"I'd taken a different apex," Sir George muttered to himself.

"Now, children,* if you've followed my directions your handkerchiefs should all have a smaller triangle pointing to the right within two tall thin triangles on either side. Got that?"

"I don't want to interrupt, Jumbo," Aunt Matty said

in her pruniest voice, "but I think it might make it easier for the children if you explained that the two tall thin triangles appear when the small triangle is formed."

"I know who her voice reminds me of," Sir George exclaimed. "It's a governess we had as kids called Miss Pinkstone. Terror she was with a hair-brush."

"I don't approve of beating children," Lady Peebles said. "I always . . ."

"Margaret, please, no humanitarianism just now," her husband begged; "we shall miss the next move, which is likely to be critical."

"Now, children, the next operation is important," Uncle Jumbo announced.

"There you are, I told you so," said Lord Peebles.

"Take the apex of the thin triangle at the top between the thumb and the first or index finger of the left hand and the apex of the thin triangle at the bottom between the thumb and first or index finger of the right hand and fold them over so that they form a perfect square covering the small triangle."

"If I have to fold my handkerchief any more there'll be nothing left to fold," Lady Peebles sighed. "I think I'll get Bagshaw to bring me a duster."

"It's too late now," her husband told her. "I feel the crisis is approaching."

"Well, I can catch up, Hamish."

"No, you must make the best of your own handkerchief."

"But, Hamish," she protested, "I'm practically working on a postage-stamp already."

"Hush! Hush!"

"Now, children, everything depends on the way you carry out the next operation," Uncle Jumbo was declaring.

"I told you the crisis was at hand," said Lord Peebles.

"I felt it in my very marrow."

"If you've followed my directions you should have a square in front of you with a diagonal slit."

"Diagonal means from corner to corner of the square," Aunt Matty added anxiously. "You do use such alarming long words, Jumbo."

"Sorry, Matty."

"Jumbo and Matty set us a grand example of collaboration, George," said Lord Peebles. "I hope Ben Nevis is listening to this with a handkerchief on his kilt."

"Now, children, are you ready? Take hold of the square, and as carefully as you can so as not to disturb the shape turn it over face downward on your knees. Now, if you've done that right you should see a sort of cocked hat with two small triangles underneath it."

Lord Peebles gazed at the result on his knee.

"I can't boast that's what I see," he said, shaking his head.

"Nor I," said Sir George.

"I've given up," Lady Peebles confessed.

"How do you stand, Huffam?" Lord Peebles enquired.

"I can't see anything at all like a cocked hat."

"Now then, children, take between the thumb and first or index finger of the right hand the apex of the triangle on the left and between the thumb and first or index finger of the left hand the apex of the triangle on the right and bring them across to the bottom right-hand corner and bottom left-hand corner of the cocked hat."

"It's no good, I'm beaten," Lord Peebles admitted.

"That last operation was too much for me."

"And for me!" Sir George said. "What about you, Huffam?"

"I've examined my handkerchief from every angle," he replied, "but something seems to have gone wrong."

They leaned back in the armchairs while Uncle Jumbo continued to manipulate triangles and squares.

"Now," he said at last, "if you've followed my directions you should have a trim and saucy little boat in front of you."

"What a pity we failed to lay the keel," Lord Peebles

sighed. "I should like to have a boat like that in front of me."

"Now then, Matty, please," Uncle Jumbo appealed.

Whereupon Aunt Matty was heard at the piano playing *A Life on the Ocean Wave* with what she evidently presumed was nautical abandon.

"And what about the Sailor's Hornpipe?" Uncle Jumbo asked breezily. "That's it. Tiddle-~~um~~-tum-tum—tiddle-iddle-iddle-iddle-iddle-~~um~~-tum-tum . . . are you all dancing it, children? All the uncles and aunts in the studio are, I can tell you . . ."

"I wonder if Howe's dancing it?" Lord Peebles murmured in a dreamy voice.

The Hornpipe came to an end, and Uncle Jumbo was talking again:

"Now, children, I have to introduce to you a very famous person indeed. Mr. Apsley Howe, the Minister of Waste, has very kindly found time to come to the studio this afternoon in order to tell you how you can help him in his great crusade against waste . . ."—a faint moan was heard from the direction of Huffam's chair—" . . . and he has chosen as his theme these words, 'Now then, nippers, look nippy, and nip up all the waste material you can find.'"

A convulsive shudder ran through Huffam's long thin form as Uncle Jumbo announced 'Mr. Apsley Howe' and yielded the microphone to the Cabinet Minister.

"Good afternoon, children. I suppose most of you are familiar with the maxim 'Waste not want not.' Many of you must have written it out in your copy-books, and that other maxim too, 'Wilful Waste Makes Woeful Want.' Well, I'm trying to write those two splendid maxims in the copy-book of the nation, and I'm going to ask you to help me. Last Wednesday I spoke to your fathers and mothers and told them that I wanted them to regard me as the nation's rag and bone man. You all know the rag and bone man who shouts 'Any rags, bones

or old bottles to-day?' But I want more than rags and bones and old bottles. I want everything which most people don't want. Except china by the way. I do *not* want any china at present. Later on, perhaps, but not at present. Make a note of that, will you? No china. But I want everything else. You'll often hear what people don't want called 'rubbish.' Well, I can assure you that at the Ministry of Waste we never use the word 'rubbish' because we know that so much of what other people call rubbish we can turn back into useful material. I'll give you some hints, shall I?

"First of all there are bones. After your mother has made soup some bones usually remain in the stock-pot, don't they? Then if you keep a dog he gnaws at those bones for a while, but many bones are too big for a dog to chew up and they get thrown away in the dustbin and carried off by the dustman mixed up with all sorts of other waste material. Don't you let that happen. Collect those bones and when you have collected a nice heap of them write a letter to the Controller of Waste in your district who will buy those bones from you. I'm sure there's no boy or girl that wouldn't like to earn a little extra pocket money. Well, so much for bones. Now what about old iron or scrap iron as it's called? I want all the old iron I can get. Have a good look round in your own gardens and backyards and cellars, and if you can't find any lying about there go out and look along the highways and by-ways. You'll find plenty of it. Old boots too. I've often seen an old boot lying in a ditch beside the road. Don't pass a boot like that. Pick it up and start a leather dump with it. And when you've made a big one tell the Controller of Waste in your district, and that'll mean more pocket-money for you. And while we're on the subject of boots, what about horseshoes? It's considered lucky to find a horseshoe. Well, horseshoes are going to be very lucky to you if you can find enough of them. More pocket-money! Old bicycles, chimney cowl, hot-water

bottles, golf clubs, fireplaces, sewing-machines, bedsteads, flat-irons, scales, mangles, birdcages, stoves . . ." Huffam made the noise which is ascribed in emotional writing to the wounded stag. . . . "Oh, yes, and pails and bins and pots and pans and baths . . ."—again Huffam made that noise which is ascribed to the wounded stag. . . . "I tell you, children, there's no end to what you can collect. You all collect something, don't you? Stamps or birds' eggs or cigarette cards? Well, I want you to collect for your country. I want to be able to travel all over the country in another few months and not be able to see a bit of unused waste material lying about anywhere. You all know what ambition means, don't you? Well, that's my ambition, and I'm counting on all you boys and girls in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to help me to realise it.

"I told your parents last Wednesday that this was a great crusade. So it is, and in my crusading army out to slay the hosts of waste you children are my light cavalry, and if your parents or school-teachers discourage you, don't be discouraged! Tell them that you are Mr. Apsley Howe's light cavalry acting under the direct orders of Mr. Apsley Howe himself. But I don't think you will be discouraged. I know already from the enthusiastic response of hundreds of listeners to my broadcast talk last Wednesday that the country is resolved to slay the hosts of waste. But I'll tell you this: if anybody does try to discourage you from collecting waste material send a post-card to me personally. Have you got a pencil handy? Send a post-card to the Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P., 189 Eaton Square, London, S.W. I'll say that again. The Right Honourable Apsley Howe, M.P., 189 Eaton Square, London, S.W. Just let me know if any difficulties have been put in your way and I'll have the matter gone into. That's a promise, mind, and you know enough about the grand way in which our beloved country is governed to know that a Minister of the Crown never breaks a pro-

mise . . . unless of course there are circumstances over which he has no control. Now, I don't think there's anything more I can say. It has been a great privilege for me to meet all you young people, as it were, over the microphone. I shan't forget this afternoon in a hurry, I can assure you. I feel I've enlisted a great army of splendid boys and girls for this great national effort and that between us we are going to rout the hosts of waste. Well, good afternoon to you, children, and don't forget I want everything except china."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Howe," Uncle Jumbo was saying. "You've certainly given us a most inspiring talk. I'm sure the children will give you all the help they can. And now, children, as there are still ten minutes before the news, I'm going to ask Aunt Matty to read us some of the verses from *When We Were Very Young*. Will you oblige, Matty?"

"Of course I will, Jumbo," and she obliged.

"Well, I think we may as well go back to my room," Lord Peebles suggested.

Huffam emerged from the coma of despair into which he was sinking and rose wearily from his armchair.

"Yes, there are several little questions outstanding, and I should like to have everything perfectly clear for Sir Claud."

"Queer voice Howe's," observed Sir George. "It kept going higher and higher."

"It goes like that when he's overexcited," said the Principal Private Secretary gloomily. "And he was very excited this afternoon," he added even more gloomily.

"Excuse me, my lord," said Bagshaw as the party left the servants' hall, "will your lordship be requiring the wireless any further?"

"No, we've heard all we wanted to hear."

"Very good, my lord."

"Oh, Bagshaw!"

Lord Peebles stopped and turned.

"You remember when people used to have their napkins folded up in all sorts of shapes—lilies and what not?" he asked. "You still see them sometimes in hotels."

"Very clearly, my lord."

"Did you ever study the art yourself?"

"In my younger days, my lord, I was considered something of an artiste with serviettes."

"Could you make a boat out of a handkerchief?"

"I have never actually made the attempt, my lord, with a handkerchief, but my napkin boat was always well spoken of."

"I wish you'd show me some time how it's done."

"Certainly, my lord. And your lordship mentioned lilies. My lily always attracted attention."

"No, it's the boat I'm interested in."

Lord Peebles turned away and followed the rest of the party out of the servants' quarters.

"I must say I did like that room very much, Margaret. I suppose I should be considered a nuisance if I turned it into a library."

"Hamish, don't be absurd. Of course you can't do that."

"Yes, I thought it would be declared impracticable," the owner of Spoons House sighed. "However, I think I must get a wireless-box for myself. I believe I know now where I went wrong with that boat. It was when we had to turn it over. A bit of it slipped."

"I must have got hold of the wrong apex," said Sir George. "Where did you go wrong, Huffam? Don't let it depress you too much."

They had reached Lord Peebles' own room by now.

"I wasn't depressed about the boat," said Huffam. "But I am a little worried what may be the result of the Minister's broadcast."

"I shouldn't let that worry you, Huffam," said Lord Peebles. "I think it's quite a good notion to stir up the youngsters."

"Oh, I've no objection to stirring up the youngsters," said Huffam. "But I wish the Minister had made it clear that we are issuing a pamphlet shortly in which we are giving exact directions how the public should handle the waste material gathered. The Minister allows his enthusiasm to carry him away. I really dread what may be the result of his giving his own private address like that."

"What harm would that do?"

"I'm afraid a lot of waste material will be sent to him personally."

"Surely not," Lord Peebles exclaimed.

Huffam shook his head.

"That's what happened after his last broadcast. We were bombarded with waste material at Wharton House, and so was he at Eaton Square, and so was the B.B.C."

"Really? What sort of things?" Sir George asked.

"Oh, all sorts of things. Things one would never dream of," Huffam sighed.

"I say, won't you have a whisky and soda or something?" Lord Peebles suggested. "You're looking quite jaded."

"I'm not surprised," said Sir George, "after a week-end with Ben Nevis and Kilwhillie."

"Thanks," said Huffam, "I should welcome a whisky and soda."

The extent of his suffering during that Children's Hour may be judged by this. It was the first drink Huffam had taken between meals in his life.

Chapter Twenty

THE MINISTRY AGAIN

IT was a wet and foggy morning in London when Huffam alighted from the train at King's Cross that Tuesday.

"Any luggage in the van, sir?" the porter asked.

"Yes, there's a perambulator."

"I'll nip along and fetch it," he offered, with that astonishing sprightliness which porters are able to display at the unnatural hour in the morning when travellers from Glasgow and Edinburgh emerge from the incubation of the L.N.E.R. and the L.M.S. sleeping-cars on the dank platforms of King's Cross and Euston. "You can collect the missus and the nippers while I'm gone."

Huffam winced. He did not want to hear about nippers or nipping.

"I have nobody with me," he said coldly.

"I see, sir; on your own. Well, if you'll wait here I'll run the pram along. Will you want a taxi?"

"Certainly. I'm not going to wheel my suitcase to South Kensington in a perambulator."

The porter laughed heartily at his client's little joke and tripped along the platform toward the van as blithely as if he was hearing the first cuckoo in Spring instead of confronting the year's rapid decay.

"Good-morning, sir," said Mabel. "So you've brought the perambulator back with you. We'll put it in the hall, shall we? The mistress isn't getting up to breakfast."

"No?"

"No, sir. She's had a terrible headache with indigestion, and really Cook and me got quite anxious about her."

Joan and Nigel appeared.

"Yes, I've brought the perambulator back with me.

Your mother made a mistake in sending it to Scotland. It was intended for the Vicar."

Something in their father's eye forbade his children to express surprise at this announcement.

"I hear your mother's not well," he said.

"No, she's got a frightful headache."

"I'll go up and see her."

Huffam had realised by now that in order to put matters right with his wife once and for all he would have not merely to give her the details about the disposal of the unwanted waste material, but also to confess his own surrender to the indiscretion of sending the bath and stove to the villa of the paper-works manager. In the darkened room he sat down beside the bed and held Gertrude's hand while he related his tale. His words were as carminative as cinnamon or soda mint. To crib the definition of 'carminative' in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'the gross humours were combed out like tangled wool.'

"I feel a different woman, Olly," she assured him. "And I think you were perfectly justified in sending the bath and stove to that nasty little man. And really I'm glad I didn't know about poor Miss Quekett, for if I had I should have been so frightened what she might not throw at Mabel. It would have been so disagreeable if anything like that had happened in our hall."

"It's a great relief to me, Gertrude, to know that your telegram about the bath and stove was based on a misapprehension of the facts, though actually I should not be sorry to think they were both in the charge of that very capable District Controller at Spean Bridge. You'll write to the Vicar and offer him the perambulator, won't you?"

"I will, dear. Of course, there are not many needy mothers in our parish, you must remember. And there is another point which has occurred to me. It might be awkward if the donor of the perambulator lived anywhere round here and recognised it. She must have been a very sentimental woman to keep it all these years."

"And scribble those idiotic remarks on the label about her dog and her tots," Huffam added contemptuously.

"Just so, Olly, and a woman like that would certainly know her perambulator again. Would that involve you in any unpleasantness at the Ministry?"

"You mean a question in Parliament?"

Gertrude shuddered, for to her, the daughter, granddaughter, and wife of Civil Servants, a question in Parliament was the macabre shadow lurking in the background of the fairest prospect.

"Well, it *had* occurred to me that one of those Labour Members might take a delight in suggesting that individuals were benefiting from waste material offered to the nation," she suggested.

"Yes, I think your point is a good one. I'll consult Mercer, who's the Solicitor to the Disposals Department. He will know just how we stand. Yes, you're undoubtedly right, Gertrude. I have no authority to dispose of that perambulator, but I could get Perkins to take it back to Nobbs' Bottom."

"But wouldn't that be rather a waste of a perfectly good perambulator?"

"From the Ministry's point of view the perambulator is already waste material, and the only waste of waste material with which the Ministry can occupy itself is the waste of waste material which might be turned into something else. If the Ministry occupied itself with finding employment for articles like this perambulator the owners of which either had no further use for them or desired to replace them by later models, it would be entering into direct competition with many manufacturers as well as with dealers both wholesale and retail. What Mercer may suggest is that the perambulator shall be forwarded to a District Controller for a report. He would then receive instructions whether the perambulator was to be broken up, after which the various parts like the hood, the tyres, the body, and the wheels would be allotted to whatever

branch of Waste Control could make use of them. I understand for instance that perambulator hoods form a valuable constituent in the manufacture of margarine. On the other hand the perambulator may be returned as static waste material, in which case it will in due course be graded by inspectors appointed by the Ministry under whatever degree of uselessness they allot to it. Once that is established I should imagine that some system will be introduced by which application can be made by a certain number of applicants duly registered over a stated period as eligible to apply for a certain number of scheduled articles."

"But why didn't you send the perambulator and the bath and the stove and all the rest of this rubbish . . ."

"Waste material, dear," Huffam corrected gently. "Don't you remember I told you we don't like the word 'rubbish'? Even useless waste material of the very lowest grade will never be known as rubbish."

"Yes, I do remember, Olly. I'm so sorry, but why didn't you send all this waste material to a District Controller?"

"Because we were taken by surprise, Gertrude. At present the District Controllers have received instructions only in regard to waste material already recognised as such by County Councils and other Local Authorities. The pamphlet has not yet been issued to the public, and it was to prepare the public for this pamphlet that the Minister gave his broadcast last Wednesday. Unfortunately he added that peroration of his own to the talk I had prepared for him, with the result that many people supposed he was making an appeal for waste material to be sent to him personally. Incidentally, I feel much worried by his having given another broadcast yesterday to children. However, I shall ascertain the reactions to that when I go down to the Ministry presently. And I shall probably ask Perkins to dump the perambulator—dump is a technical expression in this case and does not imply any violent

action—to dump the perambulator, I say, either in Nobbs' Bottom or in the Tottenden reception ground for waste material, where I understand the bath and stove have already been successfully evacuated."

"Meanwhile, the perambulator must remain in our hall?" Gertrude asked, a trace of dejection in her tone.

"For the present, I'm afraid, yes."

"Olly dear, would you mind saying something to Mabel in a nice cheerful voice about you know it's rather in the way but it won't be long?"

"Why, did she resent the perambulator?"

"Oh no, but she *was* a little fussed first by Miss Quekett and then by this Mr. Glegg, and in fact she did give me a month's notice on Saturday. I refused to accept it of course, as I could see the poor girl was overwrought, and indeed I was a little overwrought myself."

"Don't worry, Gertrude. I'll say a cheery word to her."

"Thank you so much, dear."

"And now I must have my breakfast and get away to the Ministry as soon as I can. You're really feeling better?"

"I'm feeling perfectly well. I shall get up at once."

"Don't overdo it."

"No, no, I won't. Olly, you have made me so happy."

Huffam smiled at his wife benignly and his pale face and red hair disappeared round the door, followed a second or two later by the rest of his long thin form.

"Ah, Mabel," he said as he was going into the dining-room, "your mistress tells me that you've been having some strange callers. Don't worry about them. We have people like that coming in all day at the Ministry of Waste. And I expect that perambulator's rather in your way?"

"Oh no, sir, it's quite all right."

"It won't be in your way for long."

When Mabel went down to the kitchen she told Cook that from what she could make out of things He and She had made it up.

"I think I'll take back my notice, Cook."

"I don't know what you ever give it in for."

"You never saw that hump-backed fellow. No, really, Cook, without a word of a lie, his eyes were awful. And you never saw that woman with the flowers. I never saw anything like her—only once, and that was when I passed a funeral in Brompton Cemetry on the top of a 'bus."

"Well, you didn't give in your notice then."

"No."

"Well, that's what I say."

"And the perambulator's going soon."

"Ah," Cook breathed oracularly.

"I still think there's something funny about it."

"You do, eh?"

"Very funny if it comes to that."

"Well, if you'll take my advice, and which you won't, you'll keep your thoughts to yourself, Mabel Hopkins. If They've made it up, the less said about other people's prams the better."

As soon as he reached the Ministry Huffam made haste to report to Sir Claud Huntbath on the situation at Glenbogle Castle and Spoons House.

The Permanent Secretary listened carefully, and at the end of his subordinate's lucid exposition, which he followed with the help of a map of Scotland, he gave one of those tremendous decisions for which he was famous.

"There's only one thing to be done, Huffam," he said, his lush eyebrows meeting, his bald buff crown wrinkling.

"Yes, Sir Claud?"

"Compromise. We must find a formula which will probably be distasteful to both parties, but after all it's better to leave both dissatisfied than satisfy one at the expense of the other."

"What do you propose?"

"If we take the whole of Argyll and put it in the Region of Mr. MacDonald—I don't think we need continue to call him Ben Nevis among ourselves—we shall upset Lord

Peebles. On the other hand, if we take away from Mr. MacDonald this northerly portion of Argyll which he already has, we shall upset him so much that he'll probably come down again to London, and that would be a bore. I suggest, therefore, that we should lower the line of division and include in MacDonald's Region the part of Argyll north of this inlet called Loch Fyne. I see there's a convenient canal across this narrow bit, the Crinan Canal. Let us make that the southerly boundary of MacDonald's Region."

"I'm afraid Sir George Campbell won't like that."

"But we're leaving him, or rather Lord Peebles, this curious excrescence called Kintyre, on which I see a place called Campbeltown, so presumably that's the part of Argyll in which he's most interested. Peebles is fundamentally a reasonable man. He won't mind, I'm sure. MacDonald and this fellow Cameron will have Oban, which is what they're particularly after, I fancy, and apparently we can prevent any discontent in Oban by communicating with them directly instead of through Inverness. By the way, I wonder why we've had no complaints from Aberdeen about receiving instructions through Inverness?"

"I went into that point, Sir Claud. And I gathered that Aberdeen didn't object where the instructions came from, because they had no intention of following them. They have their own system of dealing with waste, and Ben Nevis . . ."

"Don't bother to call him that now, Huffam."

"I've got into the habit of it, I'm afraid. . . . Mr. MacDonald told me that he thought it wiser to leave Aberdeen alone. He said that to give instructions to Aberdeen about waste was teaching one's grandmother to suck eggs."

"What's the origin of that phrase?"

"I really don't know, Sir Claud."

"I've always thought it rather a silly phrase. After all,

why should one's grandmother know how to suck eggs? In point of fact she'd probably make a horrid mess of the business. However, that's by the way. Well, what do you think of my compromise?"

"Apart from the effect it may have on Sir George Campbell, it seems to me an eminently reasonable one. But I do dread the effect on him, because as far as I can see he will have to remain an Area Controller instead of becoming a Zonal Controller, and he may resent that very bitterly."

"Well, of course, there's always an alternative."

"And that is?"

"To leave things as they are at present. It would save a lot of bother."

"It certainly would."

"And we have to remember that time is itself a precious commodity which we in this Ministry have no right to waste. It will take a great deal of time . . ."

"And paper."

"Yes, and paper also to effect this change. Yes, the more I think about it the more I am inclined to let well alone. I'll write Mr. MacDonald a personal letter and tell him that all the suggestions he made to you have been carefully noted and are being borne in mind, but that for the present it has been decided to maintain the status quo . . . ah yes, I have it, I have it! . . . with this difference, that Western Inverness-shire with all that part of Argyllshire north of Loch Linnhe shall become a Zone instead of an Area, and consequently that Mr. Hugh Cameron will in future be a Zonal Controller instead of an Area Controller, and that there is no objection to appointing two extra Area Controllers for the Zone within his control. Surely that will solve the problem?"

"I believe it will, Sir Claud. But may I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly, Huffam. Suggestions are what I want."

"If we could take Loch Etive as the northern boun-

dary, that would put Ballachulish and Glencoe into the Highlands Region, which I believe would give great satisfaction. The proposal to make Kilwhillie . . ."

"Where's that?"

"I'm sorry, I mean Mr. Cameron. That's what he's called."

The Permanent Secretary shook his head compassionately.

"As Mr. Cameron is to become a Zonal Controller," Huffam continued, "it might add point to his promotion if a small amount of additional territory was brought into his Zone."

"Yes, I think that sounds a very sensible suggestion. All right. I'll communicate with Mr. MacDonald in that sense."

"And now, Sir Claud, as that business is settled I should like to be instructed as to what line I am to take with the Minister about his broadcast."

"Surely that unfortunate business of last Wednesday is all over and done with?"

"I'm not referring to last Wednesday. I'm referring to yesterday."

"To yesterday?" Sir Claud exclaimed, his eyebrows bristling.

"Didn't you know he gave another broadcast yesterday?"

"I'd no idea of it."

"In the Children's Hour. I heard him. I was at Spoons House at the time."

"What did he say?"

"Well, it was practically an incitement to all the children in the country to go out and collect waste without any reference to anybody except himself."

"Except himself? Except himself, did you say?"

"Yes, he told them that if they were discouraged by parents or school-teachers they were to send him post-cards to his private address."

"Huffam," said the Permanent Secretary sternly, "this sort of thing must stop."

"I am entirely of your opinion, Sir Claud. Naturally I never dreamt he had not consulted you before agreeing to this second broadcast. I saw the announcement of it in the *Glasgow Herald* at Fort William, but I took it for granted his talk would have been written for him by somebody at the Ministry. But when I heard it I knew at once it could only have been written by himself."

"If he won't listen to me, I'll ask Sir Francis Robinson to speak to the Prime Minister about it," said the Permanent Secretary, his eyebrows slanting diabolically. Sir Francis Robinson of the Treasury was the Head of the Civil Service.

"I was going to ask you, Sir Claud, if I could resume my position as an Assistant Secretary. I feel that Mr. Howe is more than I can manage. I know it was your intention when you asked me to act as his Principal Private Secretary that I should exercise a restraining influence. I have done my best, but I am conscious, bitterly conscious, that I have failed."

"Don't reproach yourself, Huffam. It is not your fault. Naturally when I asked you to give up your week-end and investigate the delicate situation which had arisen in Scotland over the partition of Argyll I never foresaw this new B.B.C. outrage. In fact it is still incredible to me that a Minister of the Crown could twice in one week defy the permanent officials of his Ministry in this manner."

"It was agreed that he should give the first broadcast, Sir Claud."

"But not that he should add a peroration of his own composition."

"That is true."

"But that he should go off to the B.B.C. without even notifying me of his intention is . . . is . . . well, really, the appropriate epithet escapes me. However, it must not, it *shall* not occur again. Meanwhile, I consider it more

important than ever that you should continue to act as his Principal Private Secretary, and I hope you will not press me to look for somebody else. You can be sure I shall not forget your valuable services."

"If you put it that way, Sir Claud, naturally I shall endeavour to do my best."

"I know you will, Huffam. When the Minister comes in this morning you can say that you believe I was surprised to hear of his broadcast. That should make him feel a little uncomfortable. And then I'll ring through and tell him I wish to speak to him urgently. And that will make him feel still more uncomfortable, I hope. By the way, I had a note from Sir Bertram Pringle to say that the Ministry of Production people are likely to offer a good deal of opposition to our taking over waste rubber, so I think we should get out our pamphlet at once, and then when we have achieved a formula by a little give and take on both sides we can issue a supplementary leaflet."

"I do agree with you, Sir Claud, that these two broadcasts make it essential the public should be instructed at the earliest moment possible what to do with the waste material they have gathered."

"Exactly. Otherwise there will be overlapping in every direction. Well, thanks very much for your excellent work up in Scotland. I do hope it didn't spoil your week-end."

"No, I enjoyed myself, and I have gathered a lot of valuable information which I shall send you in a written report."

Sir Claud's eyes gleamed.

It was nearly noon before Mr. Apsley Howe reached the Ministry.

"Ah, Huffam, back from Scotland? I hope you managed to shed some light on what appears to be the rather obscure state of affairs in Argyll?"

"I think Sir Claud has been able to find a formula, sir."

"Capital. By the way, I have a few postcards here, and possibly others may be arriving in the course of the next few days. I don't think you or Upwey should be bothered with them. Perhaps you'd get Miss Wicker to look through them and send a formal reply.... Mr. Apsley Howe thanks you for your postcard and desires me to let you know that he is giving the matter his personal attention."

"Postcards, sir?"

"Yes."

"The result of your broadcast yesterday afternoon?"

"Ah, you heard it, did you?"

"I listened to it with Lord and Lady Peebles and Sir George Campbell."

"I think it struck the right note, don't you?"

"Sir Claud Huntbath was a little surprised you had not communicated to him your intention to broadcast in the Children's Hour, sir."

"Was he? Oh!"

The Minister of Waste began to hum to himself, and the telephone buzzed.

"Sir Claud is anxious to see you, sir," said Huffam in the tones of an assistant-master telling one of his pupils that all his efforts have been in vain and that the Headmaster now has the matter in his own hands."

"Ask him to come round to my room."

The Minister of Waste retired to his sanctum, still humming to himself, the frequent change of key suggesting nervousness rather than exhilaration."

"I think Sir Claud attaches too much importance to the unconventional little talk I gave to the children yesterday afternoon," said Mr. Howe, when about ten minutes later he returned to the room of his Principal Private Secretary. "To hear him one would think I'd let a swarm of locusts loose on the country. After all, this isn't the Home Office. We can afford to be a little more unconventional in our methods here than in the old-established Ministries."

"Yes, sir, but you remember what happened about

that waste material which accrued as the result of your first broadcast?"

"But I went out of my way to say that we did *not* want china. I said it twice."

"You did ask for stoves, sir, and for baths," Huffam reminded him reproachfully.

"Yes, but I asked for lots of other things as well. By the way, I haven't thanked you for dealing so efficiently with that stove and bath. What happened to them ultimately?"

"They were dumped, sir."

"Ah, they were dumped, were they?"

"Yes, sir, they were dumped on the receiving-ground for waste material at Tottenden."

"Where of course they'll remain," said the Minister sagely.

"I hope so, sir."

"Things usually do remain where they're dumped. I never told you, did I, what inspired the idea for this nation-wide crusade against waste? I think you'll be interested. There's a field on the road between my place High Fettle and the station at Great Eating, into which somebody dropped a worn-out motor-car about six years ago. It's always been an eyesore, and it becomes more of an eyesore every year as it decays. I took the matter up with the Local Authorities and discovered there was no machinery for dealing with this decaying car provided the farmer on whose field it had been dumped did not take steps to have it removed. I realised that this kind of thing must be going on all over the country, particularly with boots and bedsteads. I don't know who the people are that leave bedsteads leaning against hedges in quiet country lanes, but obviously it argues a kind of desperation in the owners. Well, I thought to myself, why shouldn't that desperate energy which leads a man to go out in the middle of the night and lean a bedstead against a hedge in a quiet lane be used for the benefit of his

country? And that's how the idea for the nation-wide crusade came to me. However, we must get on with the correspondence, Huffam. I want to go down to the House fairly soon to-day. Any interesting points you'd like to take up with me?"

"Here's a letter, sir, from a lady in Appleby."

"That's the capital of Westmoreland, isn't it?"

"It is, sir."

"There are *some* facts one never forgets," said Mr. Howe with simple pride. "What does this good lady say?"

"She raises the question of spectacle-cases, sir. She says she has been making enquiries and finds that in proportion to the number of spectacle-cases made more are mislaid or lost in the course of a year than of any other single article."

"Well, we can't do anything about that, Huffam. That would be a matter for one of the innumerable departments or branches of the Ministry of Health."

"You don't think I should make a minute for the Experimental Department to send us a report on the possibilities of old spectacle-cases?"

"Don't touch 'em," said Mr. Howe firmly. "We don't want to touch spectacle-cases or false teeth or trusses or any of that kind of thing. It'll just stir up trouble. No, no, write and say that I'm much obliged by her communication as to old spectacle-cases, that it has been noted, and that it will be borne in mind."

"And then there's a letter from another lady who thinks that a great deal of human electricity is wasted annually."

"Human electricity? What's she mean?"

"She says that she has noticed crackles and flashes on her underclothing when divesting herself of them . . . of it at night, and asks if there is no way of applying this electricity."

"It's obviously another lunatic. Don't pay any attention to her."

"It's one of your constituents, sir."

"Oh, it's one of my constituents, is it? Ah, well, um . . . compose a personal letter which I will sign . . . you know the kind of letter I always send to a constituent, and suggest that the Ministry of Health might welcome her valuable observations."

"She offers to send you some of her combinations in order that you may test for yourself these electrical phenomena. I take it you'd rather she didn't send these garments?"

"Where does this lady live?"

"Chalkhampton, sir."

"Yes, well, that's strategically of considerable importance in an election campaign. I don't want to offend this good lady. Still, I can't have her sending me her combinations. Tut, tut! Well, try and get out of these combinations, Huffam, as tactfully as you can. It's all very well for Sir Claud Huntbath to deprecate these broadcasts of mine, but he forgets that it is I who have to bear the burden of them. Women don't want to send him their combinations. I haven't told you yet about a possible attempt to assassinate me on Saturday night. Some statesmen would welcome the publicity of an attempt to assassinate them. But I shun that kind of advertisement. Yes, a Communist, or possibly an Irish Republican, was concealed in the shed of my champion Guernsey bull. Luckily some hay got up his nose and he sneezed. This put me on the *qui vive*. I struck a match and saw the most ruffianly face it is possible to imagine glaring at me. My cowman and I pursued him, but he got away leaving a cushion behind with which he either intended to smother me outright or, as I have thought later, possibly to stifle my cries while I was being kidnapped. The C.I.D. are looking into the matter. The local police were completely at sea. But I've enjoined the strictest secrecy, and there's not likely to be anything about it in the Press."

"I'm extremely perturbed by what you tell me, sir."

"Oh, don't perturb yourself too much, Huffam. A man expects this kind of thing when he enters public life in these days. I do feel a little hurt, however, by the attitude Sir Claud has adopted toward this talk of mine yesterday afternoon. I mean to say, to lecture about premature publicity as he did just now to a man who's nearly been assassinated over the week-end without saying a word about it to the papers shows a certain lack of proportion, don't you think? However, I've no right to commit you to an opinion about a senior official."

"Well, sir, as long as the children's response to your broadcast doesn't take the form of the adult response," Huffam sighed. "I can assure you I had more trouble with that bath and stove than you might suppose, and I still have the perambulator on my hands."

"Have you? What condition is it in?"

"It's really in very good condition. It appears to have been employed as a species of keepsake."

"That's capital. I want to give my cowman a present. He behaved with a good deal of pluck on Saturday evening, and I happen to know his wife wants a perambulator. I always take a warm personal interest in the well-being of those in my employment. If you'd have this perambulator sent to Mrs. Pyefinch, High Fettle Farm, Great Eating, Sussex, I shall be much obliged. You'll let me know what the expenses are."

"But do you think, sir, we are within the powers conferred upon us by the Control of Waste Act in presenting this perambulator to a private individual?"

"I don't see why not. If we can dump it, surely we can make use of it."

"I'm sorry to differ with you, sir, but that's just what I do not feel sure of. To be frank, I had already contemplated presenting the perambulator to our Vicar that it might be allocated by him to one or other of the needy mothers in his parish. Then I began to doubt my competency to take such action, and I decided to consult the

solicitor of the Disposals Board. You would raise no objection, sir, would you, to my asking his opinion before we finally commit ourselves to this proposed presentation to Mrs. Pyefinch."

"Well, I think you're making a molehill out of a mountain, Huffam, or rather, a mountain out of a molehill. After all, this perambulator was sent to my house."

"Yes, sir, but to you as Minister of Waste, not to you as a private individual."

"That of course is a point. Yes, I see the direction in which your argument is trending. Well, perhaps it would be prudent to consult Mercer."

"I'll telephone to him immediately."

"Hullo? Is that Messrs. Mercer, Mercer, Mercer and Mercer . . . is Mr. Wendell Mercer there? . . . this is Mr. Apsley Howe's Private Secretary . . . Mr. Apsley Howe, the Minister of Waste . . . yes, yes . . . will you ask Mr. Wendell Mercer to speak to me, please . . . hullo, is that you, Mercer? . . . Huffam speaking . . . I want your advice . . . last Thursday a perambulator was sent to the Minister at 189 Eaton Square in response to his drive against waste. At the moment the machinery for dealing with gifts of waste for the public is not working . . . as you know, a vast scheme of which we are only beginning to apprehend the ultimate potentialities is beginning to take shape, but at the moment there is presumably no way of dealing with anonymous gifts of waste from the public except by depositing them on local reception grounds for waste material. I think you'll find that provided for in Section D of Clause 12 of the Control of Waste Act . . . yes, I'll wait a minute. . . ."

"What's the matter, Huffam?"

"He is sending for his copy of the Act."

"He ought to know it by heart," said the Minister severely. "What would he do if he had to pilot a Bill like that through the House of Commons?"

"Hullo, Mercer . . . yes, you've got a copy . . . well,

what we want to know is whether in the case of this perambulator, which is in good order, we are entitled under the provisions of the Control of Waste Act to present it to a private individual to be used for the purposes for which it was originally intended, that is to say, as a perambulator . . . you'd like time to consider that question? Well, when could you let us know? . . . couldn't you possibly let us know this afternoon? . . . not before to-morrow? . . . Mr. Howe is anxious to have this point cleared up . . . it had occurred to me that, without unduly stretching the conditions laid down in Section D of Clause 12, a private individual might at the discretion of the Ministry be considered a reception ground for waste material . . . I see, you wouldn't care to commit yourself to such an interpretation without due consideration . . . no, well, that's only fair . . . all right then, Mercer. You'll let us know by to-morrow . . . thanks very much. Good-bye."

Huffam hung up the receiver and turned to his Chief.

"I was afraid it wasn't going to be too simple, sir. And, as Mercer says, it's no use rushing matters when we have to bear in mind the danger of creating rash precedents."

"Well, poor Mrs. Pycfinch will have to wait for her perambulator," the Minister said disconsolately.

"Yes, sir, and if I may say so I don't think you should be too optimistic about the result of Mercer's opinion. He seemed extremely doubtful over the telephone whether we were competent to effect such a transfer under the terms of the Act."

Mr. Apsley Howe sighed. He had set his heart on presenting that perambulator to Mrs. Pycfinch. Huffam sighed too, for he was anxious to see the hall of 9 Chillingham Gardens disembarrassed for ever of that perambulator. However, he reminded himself gratefully that the bath and the stove at any rate were lying safely in their last resting-place at Tottenden and that the birdcages, the

mangle, the sewing-machine, and the coalscuttles were rotting quietly in Nobbs' Bottom.

"By the way, Huffam, you remember that strange woman who came here with those china affairs?"

"Indeed I do, sir."

"Well, she turned up at High Fettle on Saturday with a clump of Michaelmas-daisies planted in an enamelled slop-pail."

"What *did* you do, sir?"

"I got the Eating police to telephone the Hodford police, and she was fetched by her maid on Sunday from the Blue Dragon where she was staying."

"She called on my wife too, and brought some Michaelmas-daisy roots for me."

"In a slop-pail?"

"No."

"Not in a . . ."

"No, no, sir. She brought them wrapped up in paper. To please her, my little girl planted them in the garden."

"How extraordinary! that's exactly what we did to keep her quiet. The local Inspector had come up to investigate the other business in the bull's-house, and the only way we could prevent her throwing this slop-pail at him was by saying we wanted to plant the daisies in the herbaceous border. My wife wasn't as annoyed as she might have been, because a horse called Michaelmas Daisy is running in the Cambridgeshire to-morrow and she's backing that as well as Tarara. In fact all my guests backed it. I rather liked the little woman myself. Apparently she had enjoyed every word of my broadcast. I wonder if she heard me yesterday in the Children's Hour?"

Huffam's heart sank as swiftly as the Monster in Loch Ness last Saturday afternoon.

Chapter Twenty-One

HORSESHOES

MISS QUEKETT had listened to Mr. Apsley Howe's talk in the Children's Hour. Miss Quekett never missed the Children's Hour. Even on that afternoon she arrived in Great Eating she had listened to the Children's Hour on the Blue Dragon's wireless before she drove up to High Fettle with her slop-pail of Michaelmas-daisies in the Blue Dragon's Ford. On the other hand she never read the papers, and so her hero's voice came as a rapturous surprise at a moment when her spirits had been lowered by her failure to get even as far as Lord Peebles with Uncle Jumbo's handkerchief boat.

"Elsie! That voice, that wonderful voice!" she cried. "Even Bulbul's voice is not so sweet."

The bullfinch had started to twitter indignantly at this and been covered up for his pains.

"Elsie, we must help Mr. Howe. But you heard what he said. He does not want china. He wants everything else, but not china. Elsie, go round to Ben Nevis, give Mr. Glegg Miss Quekett's compliments, and ask him if he'd be kind enough to step round and call on me."

"You won't go and excite yourself too much, miss, will you?" Elsie asked suspiciously. "It wouldn't do for me to go and fetch in Mr. Glegg and then you go and get all excited."

"I am as calm and cool as a cornflour shape, Elsie."

So not too willingly Elsie went along the road to Ben Nevis with Miss Quekett's message.

"I think you ought to go, Mr. Glegg," his housekeeper insisted when Mr. Glegg seemed disinclined to stir from his den.

"I've just put on my slippers," he protested.

"I know, but it'll be nice and neighbourly to go and see what the poor soul wants, and Miss Quekett isn't the only one in Oaks Road who takes peculiar fancies into their head sometimes."

So Mr. Glegg put on his boots again and went round to Sans Souci.

"Did you listen to the Children's Hour to-day, Mr. Glegg?" his neighbour asked.

"I never listen to the Children's Hour."

"You should always listen, but we won't argue about that now. Mr. Apsley Howe has made another appeal."

"Mr. Apsley Howe?"

"Yes, he wants the children to help him in his crusade against waste by giving him all the rubbish they can find."

"But I'm not a child, Miss Quekett."

"Oh yes, you are, Mr. Glegg. You and I are both children at heart. And you and I have got to help that wonderful, wonderful man. Last Thursday Mr. Burge and Mrs. Chicksands and the rest of them stole a march on the rest of us by sending Tom Needler with a lorry-load of old iron to the Ministry. Well, you and I will steal a march on them this time. We'll stir up the children of Hodford. Oh tra-la, tra-la!"

Elsie put her head round the door of Miss Quekett's sitting-room.

"You'll remember what you promised me?" she said, shaking a finger as she withdrew again.

For what Mr. Glegg in close confabulation with Miss Quekett planned to do that Monday afternoon three reasons, if not excuses, can be found. The first was that the explanation of Huffam's mysterious search for Nobbs' Bottom suddenly occurred to him after hearing Miss Quekett's story of her adventures at the British Museum and elsewhere. The second was that it was always a pleasure to take the wind out of the sails of that blowhard Burge and that dyed and deedy Mrs. Chicksands. The third, and perhaps the most potent, was that in spite of

never listening to the Children's Hour the amateur detective *was*, like his neighbour at Sans Souci, at heart a child. We shall leave Mr. Glegg and Miss Quekett in confabulation, and await the result of it.

Wednesday promised fair for Huffam. The Minister had decided to take advantage of his wife's visit to Newmarket, from which she was expected back on Friday evening, to go and spend a day and a night in his constituency; nor was he sorry to be out of reach of Sir Claud Huntbath's condemnatory glances for twenty-four hours. Huffam and Upwey worked hard at clearing off arrears of a number of letters to tell people that after very careful consideration of the matter raised the Minister had found it impossible to do or say or think or act or advise or recommend (as the case might be) what his various correspondents wanted. At the same time, they were all assured that their suggestions or requests or appeals or criticisms had been noted and would be borne in mind.

Just before one o'clock the Solicitor to the Disposals Board rang up to say that in view of the fact that many of the provisions of the Control of Waste Act would not come into force until next year, and others not for at least two years, the necessary machinery not being yet available to implement them, he felt justified in advising the Minister that the recipient of the perambulator in question might be considered a reception ground for waste material under the Act. It was to be understood, of course, that the precedent was to be considered a precedent only during the time-lag before the Act came into full operation.

Huffam at once rang up Gertrude with the welcome news that the perambulator could be despatched immediately to Mrs. Pyefinch, and a telegram with the same message was sent to the Minister at the Green Boar, Chalkhampton. It was a relief to think that when he stepped across the threshold of 9 Chillingham Gardens this evening he should find the hall empty for ever of that perambulator. That, like the bath and the stove, was now an

incubus of the past. It may be mentioned that Huffam had received from Sergeant Perkins a positive assurance that the bath with the stove inside it was lying quietly in a field at the bottom of Tottenden Rise.

"Nobody is likely to move it from there?" Huffam had asked.

"What would anyone want to move it for?" the Assistant Janitor had countered. "Besides, I made it clear to my brother-in-law it was Government property."

"That was a wise precaution, Sergeant. Thank you."

It is tempting to dwell on that agreeable Wednesday evening at 9 Chillingham Gardens, with Huffam once more able to give his undistracted attention to his son's Latin hexameters and his daughter's French composition, with Gertrude knitting peacefully by the fire, with dinner punctually at half-past seven, and all the other amenities of a civilised English household.

"Perhaps I was unduly anxious over the result of the Minister's talk in the Children's Hour," Huffam had said to his wife. "There have been no unpleasant repercussions so far."

Huffam did not read the racing news in the evening paper. If he had he would have noticed that both Tarara and Michaelmas Daisy had been unplaced in the Cambridgeshire, which had been won that afternoon by a rank outsider Communist, with Cabin Boy second four lengths behind.

On Thursday morning Dawkins, the butler at 189 Eaton Square, rang up the Ministry and asked if he could speak to Mr. Howe's Private Secretary.

"This is Mr. Huffam speaking, what is the matter? . . . the Minister informed me that he expected to return from Chalkhampton this afternoon . . . but if her Ladyship is returning from Newmarket the day before she was expected no doubt she will have communicated with Mr. Howe in that sense . . . well, I'm sorry, Dawkins, but it is right outside my province that her Ladyship should

have been upset by the turn of events at Newmarket. I am not a racing man, but I understand that the pastime is peculiarly liable to the vagaries of fortune . . . postcards? . . . how many postcards? . . . you estimate about two thousand? . . . apart from two sackfuls which have just arrived from the B.B.C. . . . and a lot of boots and shoes . . . oh, boots and horseshoes . . . I'm very much afraid, Dawkins, that they will have to wait until the Minister comes back . . . yes, possibly her Ladyship will be annoyed, but perhaps she won't get back before Mr. Howe . . . even if we could accommodate the postcards at the Ministry we certainly could not accommodate the boots and horseshoes . . . yes, I fully appreciate your anxiety about the effect on her Ladyship, but I cannot possibly commit myself to any course of action while the Minister is away . . . well, if her Ladyship throws all the postcards and boots and horseshoes into the Square that will be a matter between her and the Square authorities . . . yes, I'm afraid the only thing, Dawkins, is to do nothing and see how the situation develops."

Huffam was determined that there should be no repetition of last week's difficulties. As soon as he had hung up the receiver he went along to see the Permanent Secretary.

"You acted in the best interests of the Service," Sir Claud assured him. "I shall warn the Janitor that I shall hold him personally responsible if a single boot enters Wharton House. The Minister has only himself to thank if he has turned his own house into a bazaar. I have no sympathy with him whatever. You were also perfectly right in refusing to have the postcards brought here. Miss Wicker has quite enough to do without acknowledging idiotic postcards from children. If the B.B.C. had been properly constituted in the first place and brought into line with the rest of the Civil Service, we shouldn't be exposed to what is rapidly turning into a persecution. It is becoming increasingly clear that I shall

have to get Sir Francis Robinson to take the matter up with the Prime Minister. These irresponsible broadcasts by members of the Cabinet must be strictly, very strictly rationed."

Lady Lavinia arrived home from Newmarket about the same time as the Minister of Waste called in at Wharton House on his way back from Chalkhampton. She was, as Dawkins had anticipated, in a very bad mood. Instead of winning a thousand pounds by the victory of Tarara in the Cambridgeshire she had lost eighty pounds. Instead of winning five hundred pounds by the victory of Michaelmas Daisy she had lost twenty pounds. In addition to this she had lost on Tuesday and Wednesday another fifty pounds in other races. There was therefore something particularly exasperating after such maltreatment by fortune in the sight of piles of horseshoes in the hall of her house.

"Who in god's name put all these damned horseshoes here?" she neighed furiously.

"I told William to retain them in the hall, my lady. I did not think your Ladyship would welcome them upstairs."

"And . . . and are those boots I see over in that corner?"

"Boots, my lady. Many of them very old boots."

"Where do they come from?"

"The great majority come from all parts of the British Isles, my lady, but the ones in the cardboard-box were brought round from the B.B.C. They have been sent in response to Mr. Howe's appeal to children over the wireless. Mr. Howe was speaking again last Monday in the Children's Hour. Possibly your Ladyship was not aware of that. These postcards are also in reply to Mr. Howe's request that children should communicate personally with him."

"Postcards? I thought we must be sending out polling directions."

"No, my lady, these are all postcards. The crosses

your Ladyship was observing are kisses. Mr. Howe's talk has evidently caused a great deal of enthusiasm among the younger generation. Some of the postcards are addressed in the most endearing fashion, and one or two raise a quiet smile. Here is one, my lady, actually addressed to 'Uncle Honourable,' and here is one by a ludicrous confusion between our town and country houses addressed to 189 Eating Square."

"Don't go blithering on any more, Dawkins."

"Very good, my lady."

"You'll be performing for the B.B.C. yourself in a minute."

Dawkins smiled demurely.

"I shall not be doing that, my lady. Excuse me, my lady, but I was extremely sorry to read in the paper last night that Tarara had not come up to the high expectations your Ladyship had formed of her."

"That mare is a duck-hearted brute, Dawkins."

"Dear me, I'm sorry to hear that, my lady."

"I'll never put a shilling on her again."

"It would seem inadvisable, my lady."

"How much did you have on, Dawkins?"

"I had ten shillings, my lady. And half a crown on Michaelmas Daisy as a saver."

"So you've lost twelve-and-six."

"That is what it adds up to, my lady."

"I lost eighty pounds over the Cambridgeshire and another fifty trying to find winners on the course."

"A deplorable two days, indeed, my lady."

"And then I come back here to find the house lousy with horseshoes."

"Nothing could possibly be more unsuitable to the occasion, my lady. I took the liberty of ringing up Mr. Huffam at the Ministry, but he informed me that nothing could be done until Mr. Howe came back from Chalkhampton."

Lady Lavinia cantered angrily to the telephone.

"Is that the Ministry of Waste? . . . is the Minister back yet? . . . this is Lady Lavinia Howe speaking from her house . . . well, please put me through to Mr. Howe immediately . . . hullo, look here, Apsley, that red tapeworm of yours declares . . . oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Huffam? . . . is *that* you, Apsley? . . . I'm afraid I've just put my foot in it . . . yes, a hell of a toss . . . I thought it was you on the 'phone and it was Huffam . . . no, it wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't called him a red tapeworm . . . yes, well, it can't be helped. You'll have to smooth him down . . . but look here, Apsley, you are the damned limit, you really are . . . I get back from Newmarket after two of the most bloody awful days . . . she was never in the picture from the start . . . she ran like one of your cows in calf . . . but listen, I get back from Newmarket and find the hall lousy with postcards, old boots and horse-shoes . . . Dawkins tried to get your red tapeworm . . . all right, all right, it's no good trying to get angry with me . . . I'm the injured party . . . have you cut me off, Apsley? . . . Apsley!"

Lady Lavinia galloped back from the telephone to the hall.

"Dawkins, has Birchall taken the car to the garage?"

"Not yet, my lady. He desired me to enquire if there were any orders."

"Tell him to come back as soon as it is dark. Then put these horseshoes and those boots in the car, get in yourself and drop them out of the window at intervals in secluded suburbs."

"Very good, my lady."

As for the Minister of Waste himself, horseshoes, boots and postcards had vanished from his mind in the ghastly thought that his Principal Private Secretary had heard himself alluded to by his Chief's wife as a red tapeworm. The depth of his distress may be measured by the fact that for the first time in their married life he who had so often been cut off by her had cut Lavinia off on the tele-

phone. He had hinted at the Bath for Huffam. Now no stone must be left unturned to secure it for him in the New Year's Honours. This was the only reparation he could offer for so miserable a *faux pas*.

The Minister picked up the receiver.

"Put me through to Sir Claud Huntbath, please . . . ask Sir Claud if it would be convenient for him to see me for a few minutes . . . no, no, I'll come round to him."

Avoiding the room of his Principal Private Secretary Mr. Apsley Howe slunk along the rococo corridors of Wharton House beneath ceilings of shocked nymphs to Sir Claud Huntbath's room.

"I'm just back from a short visit to my constituency, Sir Claud. I'm glad to say there seems to be a general feeling of satisfaction with the way the Government is facing up to the stupendous task of retrenchment. No, thanks, I won't smoke. I've been thinking over what you said about broadcasting, and I feel you're right. I think it is wiser for Cabinet Ministers to keep away from the microphone except, of course, the Prime Minister himself, who has the appropriate temperament for it."

"I would make no exceptions," said Sir Claud sternly. "But then of course I am only a Permanent Official."

"What would this country do without its permanent officials? It doesn't bear thinking of. No, indeed. By the way, I've been wondering if it would be possible to send in Huffam's name for a C.B. in the New Year's Honours. Of course, if you tell me that his seniority is insufficient that ends the matter, but he has been so extremely useful to me that unless there is some insuperable obstacle I should very much like him to get a C.B."

"In normal circumstances Huffam would not receive a C.B. for another two years on becoming a Principal Assistant Secretary, but exceptionally meritorious service is always taken into account in making up the list of recommendations from this Ministry, and I see no reason why Huffam should not be recommended when we send in

our list. I myself was given the Bath when I was his age now."

"I'm delighted to hear what you say, Sir Claud. Really delighted. Would you consider it an indiscretion if I hinted to Huffam that he might expect an agreeable little surprise in the New Year?"

"No, I think you may promise as much."

The Minister of Waste stepped back jauntily along the rococo corridors of Wharton House beneath ceilings of smiling nymphs to his own room.

"Just a moment, Huffam," he said, popping his head round the door of his Principal Private Secretary's room.

Huffam entered with an expression of stern disdain upon his pale countenance.

"You wish to speak to me, sir?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, I wanted to let you know you may consider your C.B. a certainty in the next Honours List."

A flush nearly as deep as the crimson ribbon of the Bath suffused Huffam's cheeks.

"It's very good of you, sir."

"Not at all. I wanted to show my appreciation of your meritorious public service and your loyal private service to myself. I cannot congratulate you yet because the New Year is still two months off, but I couldn't resist letting you into a little secret. By the way, Lady Lavinia is a little upset."

"So I gathered, sir."

"And I've decided not to broadcast again. We will concentrate on the great Rag and Bone Rallies that we are planning for the next few months."

"I think you have come to a wise decision, sir."

But the whirlwind from the wind sown over the microphone had not yet been fully reaped.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE CHILDREN'S RESPONSE

IN obeying Lady Lavinia's instructions to scatter the horseshoes and old boots about secluded suburbs Dawkins had omitted to remove from the horseshoes and old boots the labels attached to many of them, with the result that throughout Friday boys were arriving at 189 Eaton Square to restore them to Mr. Apsley Howe, and the child being father of the man and the man being a voter, the Minister considered it wise to give orders to Dawkins to tip these boys, once for bringing back the boots and horseshoes and once more to take them away again after the label had been torn off.

The future of the postcards was settled by engaging a stenographer to answer them, and thus Miss Wicker's work at the Ministry would not be unduly interfered with.

Allusion has been made already to the optimistically energetic atmosphere which pervades Government Offices on Saturday mornings. On this Saturday morning as usual, Assistant Secretaries, Principals, Assistant Principals, and even Principal Assistant Secretaries seemed like the sweet-peas of John Keats, 'on tiptoe for a flight'. It was the first of November, and as so often in that unjustly maligned month, the weather was exquisite. London lay in a trance of palest gold, which stirred the imagination of poet and golfer and football-fan equally.

"I reckon the Arsenal ought to take five goals off Chelsea this afternoon," Sergeant Perkins observed to the Janitor.

"It's no use talking to me about football," said Sergeant-Major Pond. "It's a game I never *could* see any sense in."

The Minister had not put in an appearance at Wharton House. He and Lady Lavinia were driving down to Sussex after lunch, at which he was entertaining two Germans with whom the Ministry of Waste were in treaty for the acquirement of a process for converting broken glass into waterproof sheeting. He had prevailed on his wife to stay and do the honours of his table, and she was beginning to recover from her losses at Newmarket with the prospect of hunting next week.

"What a morning for scent!" she sniffed voluptuously.

It was in this atmosphere of general hopefulness that Huffam went along to Sir Claud Huntbath's room with a draft of the proposed readjustment of Argyll.

"I shall try to get out my full report, based on the notes I made during my visit to Scotland during the week-end, and let you have it by Monday afternoon," he promised the Permanent Secretary.

"There's not all that hurry for it, my dear fellow. Take this week-end off. You've had a wearing time during the last ten days. A little golf will do you good."

"Oh, I shall enjoy working at it. I was delighted to hear you had managed to convince the Minister that this broadcasting is a mistake."

"I don't think we shall have much more trouble with the little man. And after all, Huffam, he might be worse."

"Indeed, yes. I like him very much. Moreover, he is really anxious to do his best, and apart from this broadcasting business he has shown no signs of supposing that he can ignore the advice of the permanent officials."

"Yes, I hope we shall have no more of these Cabinet shuffles for the time being! As Birkenhead once said, 'What is the use of swapping asses in midstream?' Hark, do I hear singing?"

"It's either singing or cheering," Huffam replied.

"Or both," said Sir Claud. "Surely it can't be in the courtyard."

The window of the Permanent Secretary's room looked

down into the courtyard of Wharton House, which had just been entered by a large lorry decorated with bunting.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Huffam, who had crossed the room to see what was happening.

"What's the matter?"

"It's more waste material. I can see birdcages and a mangle and boots and bedsteads, but there's no bath, thank God."

Sir Claud wondered for a moment if Huffam's brain had been turned by the prospect of a C.B. in the New Year. He rose from his desk and hurried across to the window.

"The lorry's full of children as well as rubbish—I mean waste material."

"And what is printed on the banner?" Sir Claud asked.

"Waste Not Want Not," Huffam read.

"This is nothing short of infamous," Sir Claud declaimed. "What are those young hooligans singing?"

"It sounds like 'Nymphs and shepherds, come away'."

"What on earth is Pond thinking about to allow this disreputable circus to perform here?"

"I think he's dealing with the matter now, Sir Claud."

Huffam was right. Sergeant-Major Pond, supported by Sergeant Perkins, V.C., was ordering the lorry out of the courtyard. The children, who had again struck up 'Nymphs and shepherds, come away' when the Janitor emerged, got no further than 'this is Flora's holiday', their merry voices dying away in uncertain gurgles at the sight of two indignant military faces.

"Haven't I seen you before?" Sergeant Perkins demanded of the lorry-driver, who was Tom Needler of Hodford.

"Yes, and I've seen you before," Tom Needler retorted. "Mostly behind bars. But last week I saw you out for a walk with your keeper the same as you are now."

"You keep back, Perkins," the Janitor ordered.

"That's right, General Booth. Don't you let him blow too hard, or he'll bust himself," Tom Needler jeered.

"Who sent you here?" the Janitor demanded.

Tom Needler looked round the cab of his lorry, and a girl was pushed forward by the other children.

"We, the chosen representatives of the children of Hodford, offer to the Right Honourable Apsley Howe this the fruit of our play hours and hope it will give him . . . give him . . ." the spokeswoman faltered.

"Give him as much pleasure as it gives us, Maudie," another girl prompted.

"Give him as much pleasure as it gives us . . ." Maudie faltered again, and then blushfully withdrew among her companions, who at once started to sing 'Nymphs and shepherds, come away, this is Flora's holiday', while the boys of the delegation scowled.

"If you want Mr. Apsley Howe," said the Janitor, "you'll find him at 189 Eaton Square, not here. This is the Ministry of Waste."

"Well, pull up the plug," Tom Needler snapped as he swung his lorry round so sharply that the delegation of children sat down abruptly among the waste material they had gathered. One little girl who had sat down in a coal-scuttle began to cry, but the others again struck up 'Nymphs and shepherds', the strains of which were heard presently dying away down Whitehall.

"If ever I meet that big-mouthed driver when I'm not in uniform," Sergeant Perkins vowed, "I'll close his mouth up so tight for him he'll want a hammer and chisel to open it for a free drink. And even then he'll only be able to suck it in through a straw."

"I only hope Mr. Howe will enjoy himself when that little lot gets to Eaton Square," said the Janitor sardonically.

As a matter of fact Mr. Howe did enjoy himself. He stood in the doorway of his house and listened, with that smile which had charmed so many votes out of Chalkhampton and East Wessex, to the address of presentation by Maudie Wright. He made a short speech praising the

spirit of British youth, a spirit, he said, which was never more in evidence than in this present momentous epoch in the history of the British Empire. He beat time gently with his plump forefinger to 'Nymphs and shepherds'. Finally, he collected most of the loose cash in the house and presented it to Maudie Wright for distribution among her fellow-workers.

"You'll see it's fairly divided?" he urged the driver, for he had noticed in the eyes of the boys such a look as may be seen in the eyes of Sicilian brigands during the division of the spoils.

"I'll let Miss Quekett know the amount. She and Mr. Glegg will see it fairly divided."

"Miss Quekett?"

"Yes, sir, it was Mr. Glegg and Miss Quekett who set the children to collect all this rubbish. Where would you like it put, sir? The children will lend a hand."

"I'm afraid I must ask you to take it back and store it somewhere in Hodford until the public receive instructions how to hand it over to the District Controller of Waste."

"You don't want it, then?"

The banner embroidered with the motto 'Waste Not Want Not' drooped in the November sunlight.

"Certainly I want it. I want it very much, but not just yet."

"I'm to drive it back, then?" Tom Needler asked.

"If you please," said the Minister earnestly, as he inserted a couple of pound-notes in Tom Needler's hand. "I hope that will defray your expenses."

He ascended the steps of his house and held up a chubby hand for silence.

"Children of Hodford, Hertfordshire," he chirped, "I have already thanked you for your splendid enthusiasm. I cannot accept this collection of valuable waste material here. But I am asking you to build it up into a neat dump, and in the course of a few days, or it may be a few weeks,

I want you to hand it over to the gentleman appointed by the Government for this purpose. Will you do that?"

The children, who liked Mr. Apsley Howe very much, gave a shriek of assent, and presently, sung by happy young voices, 'Nymphs and shepherds' resounded past the sylvan oblongs of Eaton Square as the lorry headed for their Hertfordshire home.

"I always have thought so, Apsley, and now I know it," his wife declared. "As soon as a man enters the Cabinet his brain begins to soften."

"I told these people lunch would be at one sharp," he answered remotely. "That should let us get away comfortably by three. I wish now we'd asked Huffam and his wife."

"I don't."

"You'll learn to appreciate Huffam's sterling qualities one of these days, Lavinia," he sighed.

"One of these days I may find the right double for the Grand National and the Lincolnshire and win a packet," she replied. "But it's not likely."

At this moment in Wharton House Huffam himself was opening a telegram:

No sign here of bath and stove district controller has allotted space in waste reserve and wishes to know when he may expect articles hope you were successful in transferring Argyll Kilwhillie saw monster again yesterday afternoon with heaviest wash yet recorded

Donald MacDonald of Ben Nevis

Huffam wrote his reply:

Please inform district controller articles diverted to waste reserve in home counties region stop transference proposals now being carefully considered stop please congratulate Kitwhillie from me

Huffam

On his way out of the Ministry that Saturday morning he stopped to speak to the Assistant Janitor.

"I was afraid we were going to be let in for some more waste material when I saw that lorry, Sergeant. Was it a school treat?"

"It was more stuff from Hodford, sir. I wish my brother-in-law was police-sergeant there instead of Tot-tenden. That driver isn't fit to hold a licence."

"Did he go back to Hodford?"

"No, sir. Sergeant-Major Pond sent him round to Mr. Howe's in Eaton Square."

"Curious," Huffam murmured. "He didn't ring me up."

"Oh, I expect he got rid of them quite easily. They were quite a nice bunch of kids. It's only the driver who's such a bas . . . such a disgrace."

"Well, I was relieved not to see the bath and stove," Huffam said.

"Oh, I don't think you'll see them again. Playing a round of golf this afternoon, sir?"

"No, I've promised to go with my boy to a football match on his school ground. St. James's are playing Dulford."

"Well, you've got a lovely afternoon for it."

"Yes, indeed. Good-afternoon, Sergeant."

"Good-afternoon, sir."

Just as Huffam with Nigel and Joan were walking down the steps of 9 Chillingham Gardens bound for the playing-fields of St. James's School, the Minister of Waste was escorting his two German visitors to the front door of 189 Eaton Square. He was a little weary of conversation about turning broken glass into waterproof sheeting, and he was thinking with pleasure of the talk he would have with Pyefinch in the cow-house and of Mrs. Pyefinch's gratitude for the perambulator and of the golden drive to High Fettle that afternoon.

"*Ach so!* You make the experiments yourself?" one of his guests was grunting in amiable surprise.

"No, I only wish I could," said Mr. Howe with the

breezy insincerity of the politician. "What are you looking . . ." the question faded in his throat.

The *Ersatz* expert was looking at a bath and a triple-burner paraffin-stove on the pavement beside which two boy-scouts were standing at attention.

"Well, it has been a very great pleasure to meet you both, and I do feel that our talk has been most fruitful in every way. I shall see you again on Tuesday at the Ministry. My car will take you to the Savoy now."

The guests, after a great deal of clicking and bowing and ceremonious hand-shaking, entered the car and were driven off.

"What does this mean, Dawkins?" Mr. Howe asked in the voice of despair.

"I shall endeavour to find out, sir," the butler replied. He beckoned with a lordly gesture to the two scouts. "What is the meaning of this, you boys?"

The two scouts of the Cuckoo Patrol of the First Tottenden Troop stepped forward and saluted. Then each waited for the other's eloquence. At last one of them, a fair lanky boy with cochineal-pink knees and wrists, responded to a dig in the ribs from the elbow of his companion, a thick boy with the closely-set eyes and loose greedy mouth that marked a future financier.

"Please, sir, Spreadbury and I have brought a bath and a stove for Mr. Apsley Howe," he announced.

"But where did you find this bath and stove?" Mr. Howe asked.

"At the bottom of Tottenden Rise, sir. Dyball's my name, please, sir."

"Mr. Howe said in the wireless he'd buy any baths and stoves boys could find," Spreadbury put in. "We tried to bring a fireplace as well, but it got broken."

"I am Mr. Howe, and I'm afraid you boys misunderstood me. I did not ask for these things to be brought to me. I asked you to send me a postcard if you had any difficulty about collecting waste material."

"Well, we did have a lot of difficulty with this bath and stove," Dyball insisted.

"The police-sergeant tried to stop us, until we told him we'd been asked to bring them to Mr. Apsley Howe," Spreadbury added.

"And then we couldn't get them taken away," Dyball continued. "We kept them in my father's front garden till my mother made him make me take them out. And then we put them in Spreadbury's father's front garden."

"And my mother didn't like them there either," said Spreadbury, who was anxious to keep the price up.

"And how did you get them here finally?" Mr. Howe asked.

Dyball and Spreadbury looked at one another. Then Dyball blushed and invited Spreadbury to make the revelation.

"A fellow who's keen on Dyball's sister has a lorry and drove us in from Tottenden," he said.

"Well, I'm very much obliged to you for your enthusiasm," said Mr. Howe, "and though of course I cannot accept the bath and stove, here is something for your trouble." He put his hand in his pocket for a couple of half-crowns, but the Hodford children had emptied them and he had to borrow five shillings from Dawkins.

"Thank you, sir," said Dyball cheerfully.

"Thank you, sir," said Spreadbury not quite so cheerfully. He had valued the bath alone at five shillings, the stove at another two.

"And now you must get this friend of yours to drive you and the bath and stove back again to Tottenden."

"We can't, sir," said Dyball.

"You can't?"

"No, sir. This fellow only took us in to London so that he could drive back alone with Dyball's sister," Spreadbury explained. Then he glanced at his friend and gave a quick sidelong tilt of his sinister head.

"Good-bye, sir," the two scouts said in unison, and before Mr. Howe or his butler could say a word to stop them they were running swiftly in the direction of St. Peter's Church, leaving the bath and stove upon the pavement in the pale November sunlight of the quiet Saturday afternoon.

"The young vagabonds!" Dawkins gasped.

At that moment Lady Lavinia came to the door.

"Is Birchall back? We ought to start, Apsley."

Then she caught sight of the bath and stove and screamed like a bronco which has failed to unseat its rider.

"My God! They've come back!"

"They've come back, my lady."

"You must get rid of them, Dawkins, as you got rid of the boots and horseshoes."

"I'm afraid, my lady, I couldn't undertake to drop a bath and a stove in a secluded suburb. Even with the boots and horseshoes Birchall and me were once or twice on the verge of trouble. We failed to perceive a person who was tying up his own bootlaces, and he bobbed up as we passed and took a boot on the side of his head. And one or two of the horseshoes pursued a very wayward course. . . ."

"That's quite enough about horseshoes, Dawkins."

"Very good, my lady."

She turned fiercely on her husband.

"So this is the way your red . . ."

"Please, please, Lavinia," he begged. "I and I alone am to blame for this by stirring up the Tottenden boy-scouts to do what they sincerely believed was a good deed. What we must do now is to get them removed. Where's William?"

"William has already left for High Fettle, sir, with Mrs. Drakeford."

"Then you must deal with the matter, Dawkins."

"It's Saturday afternoon, sir. I don't see who we're

going to get to deal with a bath and a stove like this on a Saturday afternoon," the butler pointed out. "And tomorrow's Sunday."

"But these foul relics can't stay on the pavement over the week-end," Lady Lavinia cried.

"Perhaps Dawkins and I between us could manage to get them into the hall," Mr. Howe suggested.

"It took William the best part of a day to get the black from that stove off him last time, sir, and he said the smell seemed to haunt him for quite a while afterwards. It would appear to have been a mixture of old grease, paraffin, smoky lamps, and . . ."

"That's enough, Dawkins."

"Very good, my lady, but if I may make so bold as to say so, I think the whole atmosphere of the house would suffer."

"And that inscription on the bath is still legible," Mr. Howe pointed out.

"Yes, sir, highly objectionable," the butler agreed. "I'll try and get in touch with Mr. Huffam."

"It's the fault of that . . ."

"Lavinia!"

Mr. Howe rang up Chillingham Gardens.

"Hullo, is Mr. Huffam in? . . . he's not . . . is that Mrs. Huffam? Good-afternoon, Mrs. Huffam . . . I'm in rather a quandary. Where could I get hold of your kind husband? . . . Oh dear, and he won't be back much before five . . . no, I'm afraid you can't do anything."

The Minister hung up the receiver.

"Huffam's gone to a football match at his boy's school. I don't know *what* we're going to do."

The impotence of a Cabinet Minister on a Saturday afternoon in London is touched by tragic irony.

"I suppose we couldn't take the beastly things down with us to High Fettle?" he asked at last.

Dawkins said nothing. It was obvious, however, that he thought the suggestion worthless.

"I know what I'll do," the Minister exclaimed. "As soon as Birchall comes back I'll drive to the St. James's football ground and get hold of Huffam."

"And leave me here with that damned bath and stove?" Lady Lavinia demanded indignantly.

"They won't eat you, my dear."

"I'm not so sure. They've got an uncanny way of doing most things. Besides, if we don't start by a quarter past three I'll be late for Jerks Wilkinson who's coming over to see me about that bay gelding I'm thinking of buying for the season."

"Well, let's go upstairs anyway," said the Minister. "I can't stand the thought of that bath and stove just the other side of the front door."

Presently Dawkins came up to the drawing-room to say that Mrs. Huffam had sent word she was on her way to the St. James's School football ground and hoped to find Mr. Huffam and let him know that Mr. Howe required him urgently.

"That's really very kind of her, Lavinia," said Mr. Howe when the butler had left the room.

"Well, considering the mess the red tapeworm . . ."

"Lavinia, once and for all I must insist that you never apply that outrageous epithet to my Private Secretary. It'll become a habit and we shall have a repetition of that dreadful indiscretion over the telephone. Fortunately I was able to smooth it over, but I could not hope to smooth it over a second time. Moreover, in this case I and I alone am to blame for the return of the bath and stove. I should not have mentioned in my broadcast either article as a piece of desirable waste material."

The Minister and Lady Lavinia sat silently in the piercing silence of Saturday afternoon in a fashionable neighbourhood. Then the car came back, and she suggested going on with Dawkins and her maid to High Fettle.

"No, I cannot accept that plan, Lavinia," he protested.

"Mrs. Huffam may not find Huffam. Huffam may have an imperative engagement elsewhere. I cannot be left alone in the house with two or three maids to grapple with any further problems that may be created by that bath and stove."

"You're as duck-hearted as Tarara, Apsley."

"I don't care. I will not be left."

"But damn it, Apsley, apart from Jerks Wilkinson, I've got a swarm of people coming down by the 4.45 and another swarm by the 6.30."

"I don't care," said the Minister sullenly. "I will not be left alone with that bath and stove."

The Saturday afternoon silence resumed its sway.

At four o'clock in getting out of a taxi, which pulled up at 189 Eaton Square, Huffam banged his head sharply. The sight of the bath and stove on the pavement was responsible.

"Who did bring these things back?" he asked of Dawkins in horrified incredulity.

"A couple of boy-scouts, sir."

"But why were they allowed to leave them here?"

"It was a most untoward occurrence," was all the butler would admit. "Mr. Howe is anxiously awaiting you, sir," he added quickly.

The Principal Private Secretary showed signs of freezing when he saw Lady Lavinia; but his Chief was so profoundly apologetic that he remembered the crimson ribbon and forgot the red tape, for it may be revealed now that Huffam had not heard the objectionable suffix. He had been quite enough offended by Lady Lavinia's jeer at red tape.

"What are we to do with them, my dear fellow?" Mr. Howe asked mournfully.

"May I use your telephone, sir?"

Mr. Howe's mood was such that if he could have brought the telephone to his Private Secretary and held it for him he would have done so.

"Hullo, is that telegrams? This is Sloane 12568. Please take down two telegrams. The first is to Bayne B-A-Y-N-E District Controller of Waste Spean S-P-E-A-N Bridge . . . please collect bath and stove at Fort William Station beginning of next week and deposit them in allotted space in waste reserve stop if allotted space already taken up owing to instructions sent in prior telegram to Regional Controller please have bath and stove evacuated in Loch Ness Huffam H-U-F-F-A-M Ministry of Waste . . .

"Please read that through . . . correct. The second telegram is to MacDonald of Ben Nevis . . . yes, the mountain . . . that's right . . . Glenbogle, Inverness-shire . . . bath and stove not being diverted to home counties waste reserve after all stop have instructed District Controller Spean Bridge to collect at Fort William stop if allotted space taken up Bayne can dispose of them in most appropriate manner . . . Huffam."

The Principal Private Secretary hung up the receiver and dialled again.

"Hullo? . . . is that Holdall Transport? . . . I want you to send a van round immediately to collect a bath and stove from 189 Eaton Square to be taken to King's Cross . . . Hullo? . . . hullo? . . .

"They've rung off!" he exclaimed to the Minister.

"You'd better try them again."

"No, I don't think I will," said Huffam pensively. He dialled for a third time.

"Hullo . . . is that King's Cross? . . . please send to collect a bath and stove from 189 Eaton Square for despatch to Scotland . . . when will you send? . . . you can't say exactly. . . ."

"Oh dear, oh dear," Lady Lavinia nickered desolately, "what *shall* we do about getting down to High Fettle? We ought to have started an hour ago."

"Do not worry, Lady Lavinia, I will stay . . ." Huffam turned back to the telephone . . . "all right, send as soon

as you can . . . it is for the Minister of Waste . . . yes, thank you."

He hung up the receiver.

"But, my dear Huffam, I can't leave you here for an indefinite length of time," his Chief protested.

"I shall be perfectly all right, sir. If Dawkins will give me some paper I will write my report on the organisation of waste in Scotland."

"My kitchenmaid will give you an excellent dinner, Mr. Huffam," Lady Lavinia promised in a friendly voice, "if you do have to stay. She's really a better cook than Mrs. Drakeford. But I hope you won't be kept quite so long. And I wonder if you and Mrs. Huffam will spend next week-end with us at High Fettle? We should so much enjoy it," she added with what was almost a tender whinny.

"Indeed, yes," said the Minister cordially.

"Thank you very much, Lady Lavinia, but I'll have to consult my wife before I accept your kind invitation."

"Of course, of course. Come along, Apsley. Where's Titley? Dawkins, put paper and drinks for Mr. Huffam in Mr. Howe's library. And tell Susan I want to speak to her. And hurry, because we must get off at once."

"Thank you, Huffam. Thank you very much indeed," said the Minister, beaming at his Principal Private Secretary.

"Just one thing, sir. I wonder if Dawkins could wrap a thick piece of brown paper round the stove. I know what the effect of that stove is on drivers, and we do want to get rid of it for ever this time. I'll address the labels if Dawkins will find me a couple."

"Can you label a bath?"

"I'll manage somehow."

Ten minutes later the car was off to High Fettle with Mr. Howe, Lady Lavinia, Titley, and Dawkins.

"He's quite a good fellow, that seckertary chap, Birchall," the butler observed to the chauffeur by whom

he was sitting. "If he comes down to our place in the country it'll be quite a pleasure to look after him."

Back in Mr. Apsley Howe's library Huffam was already coiling over his report.

It was nine o'clock that evening when an L.N.E.R. van drove up to 189 Eaton Square. By the light of a gibbous moon the bath and stove departed to lie at rest upon the watery bed of the Loch Ness Monster.

EPILOGUE

AFTER that gibbous moon waned Miss Quekett left off wearing silver ornaments in her back hair and became preoccupied with her Christmas bulbs. Mr. Glegg returned to the solution of fictional mysteries. Lady Lavinia speculated upon the winner of the Manchester November Handicap and succeeded in finding it. The pamphlet about Waste was issued to twenty million slaves of the bureaucracy, and was followed by three supplementary leaflets. The Minister of Waste addressed a Great Rag and Bone Rally at the Albert Hall.

The transference of another portion of Argyll to the Regional Controller of Waste for the Highlands and Islands caused the profound dissatisfaction of every compromise; but the promotion of Kilwhillie to be a Zonal Controller elated him so much that he saw the Loch Ness Monster twice more before Christmas and again at Hogmanay. These appearances in mid-winter were unusual. Perhaps the Monster had been stirred by the sight of the bath and stove on their way down to the bottomless depths of Loch Ness into which they had been evacuated by the District Controller of Waste.

And on New Year's morning, under the heading C.B. (Civil Division) in the Honours List, appeared the name of Oliver Huffam, C.B.E., Principal Private Secretary to the Minister of Waste.

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